

*The Department
of
Queer
Complaints*

CARTER DICKSON

*Introduction by
Richard Levinson and William Link*

The Department of Queer Complaints by Carter Dickson

Nothing warms the heart of a mystery fan like a seemingly insolvable puzzle unraveled solely by the thought processes of a Holmes-like sleuth. If the story contains elements of the macabre or supernatural, so much the better. And if the reader must check himself from turning to the final page for blessed relief from suspense, the author has achieved the pinnacle of his craft. Here are not one but eleven such tales from the pen of Carter Dickson (also known as John Dickson Carr). This collection contains no run-of-the-mill plots, no routine developments, no traditionally dispatched victims. Only the likes of Scotland Yard's unflappable Colonel March, a man whom nothing on earth could possibly surprise, can resolve such enigmas in seven of the eleven stories. The Colonel heads that peculiar but necessary branch of the Yard, the Department of Queer Complaints. In that capacity, he is expected to solve the strangest of cases, those which defy the merely competent investigative powers of the other inspectors. The four tales in which March does not appear will also fascinate and entertain through the devices controlled by this master of the genre, Carter Dickson.

This Gregg Press edition includes a new introduction by **Richard Levinson** and **William Link**.

DISCARD



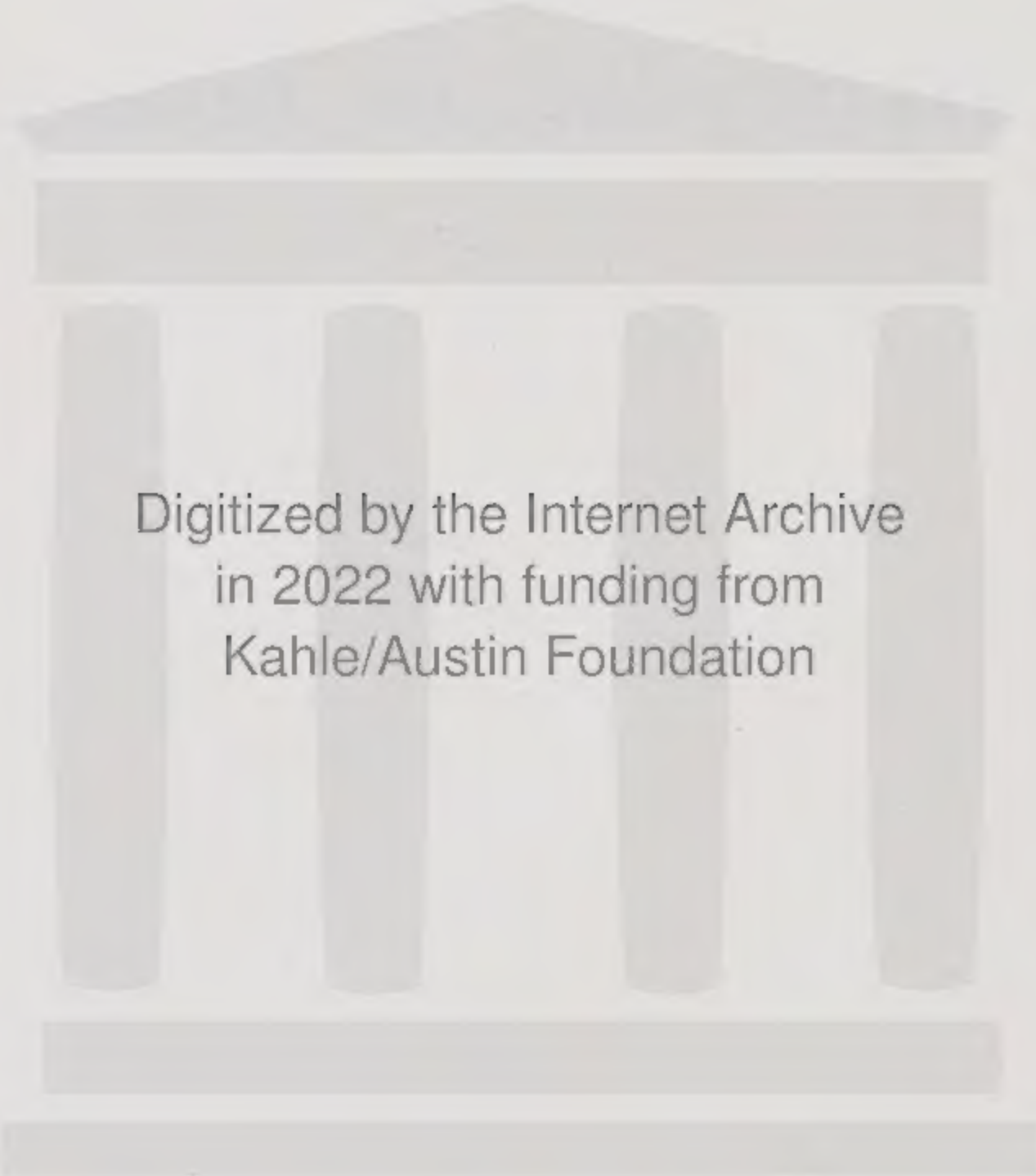


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**THE GREGG PRESS
MYSTERY FICTION SERIES**



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The Department of Queer Complaints

CARTER DICKSON

With a new introduction by
RICHARD LEVINSON AND
WILLIAM LINK



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Introduction

IN THE BROADWAY HIT "42nd Street," the down-at-the-heels director attempts to inspire the little chorus girl from Allentown, Pa., by telling her about "the two most glorious words in the English language—musical comedy!"

There are, of course, other words, or felicitous combinations thereof, that also lift the spirit, among them "Christmas morning," "fair and warmer," and "Chateaubriand with bernaise." But of all the many and varied marriages of vowels and consonants, none is more likely to set the black hearts of a certain breed of mystery buffs to beating faster than those incantory phrases—"hermetically sealed chamber" and "impossible crime."

The moment they are uttered—or read—the real world falls away, and good riddance. Gone are transit strikes, pooper-scoopers, termite damage, and the energy crunch. Instead, we are instantly transported to an ordered universe—somewhere in the past, where the only problem is how a cunning and diabolical murderer penetrated a locked room, struck his (or her) deadly blow, and then atomized himself, passed like mist through a bolted door—and vanished without a trace.

The mystery fiction of today trafficks endlessly in CIA agents, or ex-CIA agents, or would-be CIA agents, who run about uncovering global conspiracies, who shoot, stab, garrote or decapitate their adversaries, and who spend an inordinate amount of time in one section or another of the Middle East, with obligatory side trips to London, Paris, Washington, Geneva, and various Baltic fishing villages.

But if the mysteries of the past were more limited in locale—the snowbound country manor and the library with the green-shaded

lamp—they were more romantic somehow, more atmospheric, and beyond question more ingenious. And in an odd sense they remain more in tune with the modern sensibility—the detective was the supreme rationalist, grappling with a crime that seemed to violate the very laws of nature. If he failed to find a logical explanation, if only the supernatural could account for a murderer's ability to appear and disappear, or walk across snow without leaving footprints, then we would all be plunged back to a time of ghosts and witchcraft, a new Dark Age far more frightening than Russian spies and secret agents, who are only, after all, the mundane stuff of daily newspaper headlines.

John Dickson Carr had no taste for the prosaic. Perhaps out of annoyance at the fact that he was born several centuries too late, he populated his books with devils and Regency rakes, with earnest young men and breathless ingenues, and with wonderously eccentric old codgers whose appetites were Gargantuan, whose talents for profane invective were unrivalled, and whose mental equipment spun with Swiss precision. Unlike many of his Golden Age contemporaries, Carr had a gift for language that was remarkably evocative, and in spite of his penchant for the bizarre and the exotic he had a robust sense of humor. Who can forget, for example, Sir Henry Merrivale's famous pratfall down the steps of the Senior Conservatives' Club in "The House in Goblin Wood?" And what student of misdirection will ignore the crafty planting of clues during this diversionary moment of comic relief?

For all his many gifts, Carr is best known as the practitioner of the "locked room" puzzle and the "impossible crime" story. The classic mystery of the 30's and 40's is as formal as a Kabuki play and as bloodless as a chess match, and as such it often runs the risk of dullness and predictability. But to the "who" Carr added the "how," and this double guessing game keeps his pages alive. Bencolin, Gideon Fell, and H.M. are usually confronted with natural law gone wrong, with the possibility of dark and otherworldly forces, and only powerful applications of "sitin' and thinkin'" can exorcise the demons and show the clockwork behind the miracles.

Carr, like Pinter, has made the room a thing of menace, and in his universe locks and bolts and closed shutters provide no safeguards

against villainy. Inanimate objects tend to behave strangely. Weapons are forever disappearing, or—as in the case of one of the stories in this collection—they lurk in plain sight and yet remain invisible. Suits of clothes have no one inside them, cars drive by themselves, guns are fired by disembodied gloves, and (in “Below Suspicion”) heavy metal coffins are tossed around like toys.

The Carr murderer is a creature of infinite imagination. He scorns ordinary stabbings and bludgeonings—unless he can perform them by remote control. When he poisons, he does so under conditions where no poison can possibly exist. And when he wants his victims dead he arranges either to perforate them with a crossbow shaft (in that best of all locked room mysteries, “The Judas Window”), or else frightens them to death (in “He Who Whispers”).

Carr took none of this seriously. He knew he was writing romances at a far remove from reality, and he gloried in razzle-dazzle, blood and thunder, and hocus-pocus. For him, dullness was the cardinal sin, and he used every trick of his trade to banish it from his books. One of his more endearing traits was making asides to the reader, chiding, lecturing on arcane lore, and even, in “The Reader is Warned,” engaging in a running commentary via footnotes in which he cheerfully knocked the props out from under any solutions the reader might come up with.

He had a sense of theatre and a genuine—even scholarly—feel for history. He loved magic, swordplay, and the black arts. And if his characters were on the conservative side, they were mostly decent sorts who yearned for adventure, always found it, and for the most part conducted themselves responsibly. In fact, the Carr heroines are among the most appealing and liberated in the mystery fiction of the time, unlike their virginal sisters in other books they were not above lustful thoughts and a full-blooded desire for a tumble in the hay.

“The Department of Queer Complaints” shows the early Carr in top form, indulging in his specialty with style and infernal ingenuity. The stories are filled with invention, and many of the devices he created have been, in Poe’s wonderfully archaic word, “purloined” by other writers. Colonel March may not be as suave as Bencolin, as flavorful as Fell, or as rambunctuous as H.M., but his amiable

imperturbability acts as a ballast to the surreal and off-trail cases he always seems to be encountering. He is a stabilizing presence in a world gone mad, and as such he is a comfort to the hapless men and women who seek him out in the hope that he can explain "something that couldn't have happened."

The good Colonel appears in seven of the eleven stories in this collection. The remaining four are random efforts, several of them tales with a touch of the supernatural. One, "The Other Hangman," is a gem in the tradition of Wilber Daniel Steele and Steven Vincent Benét, a peculiarly American fable of rough justice. All of them are worth reading and savoring.

If a suggestion may be permitted, the best time to dip into this book is late at night, with a comfortable chair drawn up to the fire. There should be a glass of port at hand and a wedge of cheese, and it would help if a storm is tossing the branches outside. This is the proper way to enter the world of John Dickson Carr. And if the atmosphere is a bit threatening and there's a sense of forboding in the air, there's absolutely no reason to be afraid.

After all—the door is locked.

RICHARD LEVINSON AND WILLIAM LINK
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

The Department of Queer Complaints

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The New Invisible Man

A TAXI brought him to the Derby Street entrance of New Scotland Yard. He was a well-dressed man with somewhat protuberant eyes, an inquiring nose, and a frantic seriousness of manner. And he was so excited that the constable on duty at the entrance could hardly make out a word he was saying.

"Murdered him right in front of me!" gabbled the newcomer, holding to his bowler hat as though it might blow off. "Might have murdered me too, and very nearly did, because the next bullet hit the lamp-shade beside me, and——"

"Now, sir!" urged the law soothingly. "Who did all this?"

"A pair of gloves did," said the newcomer.

"A what?"

"A pair of gloves. Only they hadn't got any hands inside them. Or any arms or body either, for that matter. The fellow was invisible. And mark my words, he'll kill that girl next!"

The constable stood back and studied him. This man did not look demented. His eyes were watery, and he gulped out steamy breaths on the raw air.

"Yes, sir," said the constable. "Straight on; first turning; third door on the left."

He spoke a formula. The door he indicated bore only the words, D-3, COLONEL MARCH, but many stories

lay behind it. It is, in fact, the home of queer tales, and exists solely for the purpose of receiving them. To the Metropolitan Police come strangers with complaints which do not seem to bear the light of day or reason. But, unless the complainant is an obvious lunatic, such matters have to be investigated; and Department D-3 is their clearing-house.

D-3 has its own staff, notably Inspector (ex-Captain) Roberts, who served under Colonel March in different days. It is not governed by the routine organization, and deals direct with the Commissioner's office. Some maintain that Colonel March was put in charge of it because nothing on earth could possibly surprise him. He is also well served by his vast fund of good-for-nothing information, and his absorption in any kind of puzzle from a jigsaw up. Those who get past Inspector Roberts find in the inner office a large, amiable man (weight seventeen stone) with a speckled face, an interested blue eye, and a very short pipe projecting from under a cropped moustache which might be sandy or grey.

On this particular morning, the agitated man in the bowler hat did get past the outer office. Business, as Colonel March pointed out to Inspector Roberts, was bad; and they might as well hear what the man had to say.

"I am aware," said the newcomer, with a certain dignity, "that you must think me mad. Very well. Say that I *am* mad——." His native caution checked him. "Er—no, don't say that; perhaps I am a little upset. But surely my name and standing should be sufficient guarantee that I am telling the truth? My name is Rodman, Horace Rodman. I am the senior partner of Rodman & Hughes, Chartered Accountants and Income

Tax Consultants. I have lived for sixteen years at Number 24 St. Nicholas Row, Hampstead. Sir, I saw a murder done; and, Heaven help me, nobody will believe it."

His voice had acquired an asthmatic and passionate note.

"It's quite all right," March assured him. "I knew a fellow once who had the same trouble. Just fire away."

"I'm not sure I know how," said Rodman abruptly, after a pause. He reflected. "It concerns a new block of flats which has just gone up opposite my house in St. Nicholas Row." He reflected again. "A number of houses were torn down to make room for the flats. My friend Mrs. Atchison, of Number 18, told me she was not sorry to see Number 23 go, because it certainly had an unpleasant reputation in her grandfather's time."

"You mean it was supposed to be haunted?" asked March, with still greater interest.

"No, no, no!" cried the other. "I did not say so," he added. "And I cannot imagine any -er- 'haunt' transferring itself to the modernistic building across the way. I must tell you about the architecture; it has a great deal of bearing on what I saw. You have probably noticed these new Spanish-style buildings, in yellow stucco with green facings: where every corner is rounded, and every room has one long window stretching entirely across it, like the glass door of a bookcase? Eh? Yes. That was how I could see so clearly.

"You see, the flats are not yet quite finished. Although there are a number of 'let' signs in the windows, only three or four families have moved in. I am interested in my fellow-man, sir," said Mr. Rodman, rather defiantly.

"I am a student of human nature, and I don't care who knows it. Well, I *had* noticed the couple occupying the four-room flat which is directly opposite the second-floor windows of my house. They are (or profess to be) a Mr. and Mrs. James Hartley. The husband is a nondescript young man, who drives a 1936 Hillman coupé, and has an office in the City. The wife is a really beautiful, and, I believe, refined girl."

His sudden lyricism embarrassed him.

"I had several times noticed the young lady going in and out; and once I met her in the street. I have also seen her, with a dust-cloth round her head, cleaning the windows opposite. Mrs. Atchison thought this unbecoming in her. So did Mr. and Miss Paulus, at Number 20. I can only say," declared Mr. Rodman emphatically, "that I don't agree. She has hair the colour of ripe —well, such is the case. This much I can tell you: she is in very terrible fear of something. For God's sake do not think I am imagining things for one reason or another. If you had seen her face, as I did, after it happened . . .

"It happened, you see, only last night, February twelfth, when I was going up to bed. My bedroom is on the second-floor front. I usually retire punctually at eleven; but I was a little later than usual, because I had been fidgety all evening. I don't know why.

"Before turning on the light in my bedroom, I went across to draw the curtains. That was how I came to be looking straight across, not forty feet away, into the dark window opposite. No curtains have been put up there. It is not Mr. and Mrs. Hartley's bedroom or sitting-room. As a matter of fact, it is not yet furnished, except for carpets which have been fitted throughout, and one or

two odds and ends packed away there. I had seen it by daylight, and knew it for a room hardly more than ten feet square, raw enough, with cream-painted walls, cream-varnished doors, and grey carpeting.

"It was a quiet night, and very cold. In front of the flats there is a double street-lamp, which threw a faint kind of glow up over the yellow-and-green building and high up through the window. Someone, bent low, was moving quickly and stealthily round that room. It might be nothing? Quite. Quite! But the man was carrying an automatic pistol, and wore a big pair of dirty, white-cotton gloves—I saw one of them flatten out against the window like a starfish."

Rodman paused. Colonel March's big sandy-haired head was bent forward with concentration. He glanced sideways at Inspector Roberts, who was now not quite so sure of the visitor's lack of mental balance.

"You could see all this," said March, "from across the street?"

"I fetched a pair of field-glasses," said Rodman, with sudden loftiness. "Kindly do not interrupt me. The man took off his gloves, and put them down with the pistol on a round table in the middle of the room. Then he came towards the window and turned on the light. It was a dusty electric bulb, hanging from an unshaded socket in the ceiling near the window. But it gave a passable light; and I had a good look at the man's face. It was not James Hartley, or any man I had seen in those flats. I tell you I knew he was an old sinner, from the very turn of his neck and hands. He was a wicked-faced old man with a drooping moustache and thick-lensed spectacles which gave him an intensity of stare rather like

the pictures of Doctor Crippen. His overcoat had a fur collar, too. And he began to run his hands along the window-ledge, as though he were searching for something.

"Please remember the bareness of that room. I could see all of it. There was nobody else there. It had three cream-painted doors—one in the rear wall, in line with the window, and one in each of the two side walls. I should have noticed if any door had moved an inch. Not one did. The only articles of furniture were an ordinary kitchen chair, near the window; and the bare table in the centre, on which the man had put down his pistol and gloves. A box with three doors and a window. There wasn't a crevice where anyone could have hidden.

"The man began groping along the window-ledge. Finally he opened one big pane of the window and put out his bald head; I remember his shadow from the street-lamp climbing up the yellow stucco wall. He uttered a peculiar kind of whistle, which sounded very loud in the quiet street. Then he drew in his head and turned back to the door at the rear of the room as he was in the act of locking the window.

"If that whistle was a signal, he got an answer. Two shots were fired at him point-blank.

"They were fired, I tell you, from the other side of that table in the middle of the room, between the table and the rear door. They were fired from the heavy automatic which had been lying on the table. I saw them fired. The first bullet struck him in the chest and kicked him back against the window-ledge, where he fell. The second bullet missed him, drilled through his window, smashed my window, and broke the glass shade of the lamp not a foot from my head. I saw the hand

that fired the pistol; but there was no other person in that room."

Rodman nodded his head twice.

"I have the bullet, you know," he added with ghoulis hopefulness. "I dug it out of the wall in my bedroom and brought it along."

Colonel March was refreshed. His large face wore a quizzical look which was not disbelief at all; he tapped his fingers on the desk separating him from Rodman, as though he were about to make a move in a game of draughts.

"Just a moment," he interposed, "while I make sure I understand you. You *saw* this pistol fire the shots?"

"I did."

"Where was the pistol, exactly?"

Rodman changed colour. "Held by one of the big gloves, at the back of the room."

"Was it on the table?"

"No; above the table."

"I see. You were actually looking through the place where the murderer must have been standing?"

"I was."

"Excellent! . . . Any comments, Roberts?"

Inspector Roberts smiled. "Well, sir, it's interesting enough; but where's the corpse? People usually complain in the case of a murder, you know. Mr. Rodman says this occurred last night. That would be F Division. I was talking to the Divisional-Inspector only this morning, and he said nothing about it."

"Oh, yes. I am aware of that," snapped Rodman, still a curious colour. "You see, I haven't told you the worst of it yet. Shall I go on? Thank you."

"I was alarmed. I'm not ashamed to admit that. For a few seconds I quite literally couldn't move. I knew I had to go over there: duty. Besides, I was curious. But I had to find a policeman first. I hurried downstairs, got my hat and coat, and tumbled out. There was no difficulty about finding a policeman; the man on the beat had heard the shots too, and was coming to investigate. The window in the flat was now dark. I told the policeman what I had seen, though I dare say he didn't take it all in, for one reason or another. We entered the flats together.

"There were two lifts, but they didn't work; there was a porter, but we couldn't find him. We were in a great concrete shell of a building, rasping to every echo, and with a few frosted-glass lights. But I knew (Mrs. Atchison had found out) the number of the Hartleys' flat. We went upstairs and knocked. After a minute or two Mrs. Hartley opened the door. Er—her first name is Elizabeth, or Betty. She was wearing a pink dressing-gown, and looked as though she had been roused out of bed. But she was frightened; I could tell that. The trouble was ——"

"Well?" prompted Colonel March.

"She swore there was absolutely nothing wrong in the flat; that she had been in bed, and had heard no shots. The constable said quite sensibly: 'Well, ma'am, there were shots, because I heard them myself; and this gentleman says one of them nearly killed him.' She said that the inner walls of the flat were soundproof. It is only fair to admit that this is true.

"We demanded to be shown the unfurnished room. She made no difficulty about this. It opened off the central hall, where odds and ends of lumber were stacked in

confusion: a sewing machine, a big box full of framed photographs, sheets of printed paper, a folding Japanese screen through which the constable unfortunately put his foot. We cleared this away, and went in. That was when I began to have a queer sensation that something spongy had got into my head where the brain ought to be.

"For the *other* man I had seen, alive or dead, was not in the room. And there was no bullet-hole in the window.

"There was no bullet-hole in the window," he repeated.

"Gentlemen, I think that bewildered me more than the absence of the victim. There might have been time for a victim to have been carried away or hidden before we arrived. I say there *might*. But a solid .38-calibre bullet (I have it here) had gone through the glass of this window before it went through the glass of mine; and there was not a scratch here to show where it had passed. Gloves and pistol were also missing.

"The policeman, I admit, looked at me oddly. I went round that room like I had almost said, like a terrier sniffing. I don't care! Let me assure you that there was no possibility of my having been mistaken about the room, or got the wrong room. There is only one place on a direct line with my bedroom; you must test it as I did then.

"I saw the grey carpeting, the cream walls. Here was the kitchen chair. Here was the table. Here were the three equidistant doors: the rear one opened into the hall, the right-hand one opened into the sitting-room, and the left-hand one into an empty linen-closet. The only thing I had been unable to see from my bedroom was a radiator under the window. The only mark of any kind in the room was a long triangular indentation in the pile of the

carpet, where, Mrs. Hartley explained, the folding Japanese screen had stood before they cleared this room of lumber.

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"Now, Mrs. Hartley was terrified of something. That I'll swear. She has very expressive hazel eyes, and she did not even seem to hear what I was saying. She stood there with her face flushed, hugging her dressing-gown round her in the cold, but she seemed as much puzzled as terrified. I warned her, for her own good, that if she was having anything to do with thieves and killers she would regret it."

He moved his neck.

"The worst of it occurred when her husband came bursting in, tying on *his* dressing-gown, and alleging that *he* had been roused by our voices 'yelling' in his flat in the middle of the night. I was not yelling. But he was in a vile temper. His hair, which was rumpled, stuck straight out in front like the peak of a cap; and his face, which I should have described as nondescript and rather unpleasant, now looked concretely sinister.

"By this time the constable had grown apologetic, but I would have none of this. 'Never apologize, never explain' is my motto; an aristocratic motto, if I may say so. Hartley, I am afraid, was angry. He denied that he had ever seen or heard of the old man.

" 'So,' he said, 'you saw a pair of gloves pick up a gun and shoot somebody who doesn't exist? Blast my ears with lightning! Did you wake me up in the middle of the night just to tell me that? You didn't see a line of cigars hanging in the air and smoking themselves, did you?

Look at this flat. It's an ordinary flat, or at least I thought it was. Look at this door. It's a practical door, and no invisible man walked through it. If you want to search the place, go ahead. And then get out.'

"But this did not last. When we went into the sitting-room, where it was warm, something occurred that struck the anger off his face. Up to that time I was at my wits' end. Perhaps I talked sharply, and turned things out of drawers; but I am accustomed to being obeyed unquestioningly, as any clerk of mine will tell you. Then I knew I was right, for I saw it: a photograph, in an old-fashioned frame, brightly lighted by a table-lamp. There was no mistaking those staring spectacled eyes; it was a photograph of the old man who had disappeared.

"Hartley knew that I had seen it, and his expression altered. The whole atmosphere of the room changed, too. He made a quick movement to get in front of the picture, or snatch it away, but I was there ahead of him. His forward movement was so violent that he slipped on the smooth pile of the carpet; he must have twisted his ankle, for he went down with a crash that turned him muddy pale. Mrs. Hartley ran to him, screaming his first name. When she lifted up his shoulders I was rather appalled by the look she gave me; for what had I done?

"A few minutes later I was out in the street, advised by the constable to go home. They showed me proofs of the truth. I could not doubt the truth, and you will sympathize with me when I say I had the horrors all night. But I'm a taxpayer, and a decent citizen, and I insist on knowing the meaning of it. That photograph was a picture of Hartley's grandfather, who died before the war."

At this point, quietly, a constable came into the room with an official form filled up. There was a rattle as Inspector Roberts put coal on the fire. The echo of Rodman's shrill voice still seemed to linger; firelight grew brighter in the big room while Roberts used the poker. And the constable said:

"A Mr. and Mrs. Hartley to see you, sir."

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"Ask Mr. and Mrs. Hartley to wait a moment," said Colonel March blandly.

He got up and went over to stand with his back to the fire. He had the military trick of standing as though bent a little forward from the waist, his arms slightly curved at his sides; but this stiffness contrasted with the amusement of his speckled face. A bland blue eye surveyed them, and his short pipe seemed in danger of scorching his nose as he sniffed amusedly at it.

"We must discuss the matter first," he explained. "Mr. Rodman, I rather envy you. Your adventure is what a younger generation would describe as hot stuff."

"If," said Rodman, freezing up, "you prefer to make fun of——"

"Not at all," the other assured him. "I believe every word you say."

Inspector Roberts, though youngish, was well trained. He did not actually drop the poker with which he was stirring the fire, though he looked as if it had been a near thing.

"You think," cried Rodman, "I saw a ——?"

"Ghost? Oh, no." Colonel March added, as though consolingly: "Not this time, anyhow."

"Then it was a real crime after all? A real man was shot with a real bullet in that room? Is that what you think?"

"I am quite sure of it."

Rodman seemed as taken aback as though he had never believed this. "But how? I ask you, *how?* There was nobody in the room; there was no corpse, as your friend says; there was no bullet-hole in the window; there was——"

"Wait a bit," urged March. "Never mind your notebook for the moment, Roberts. Before we consider any course of action, I should like to dig a few more gems out of our friend's admirable narrative style. Mr. Rodman, how long have the Hartleys lived in that flat?"

"Two weeks last Monday, I think."

"Previous to last night, had you ever been inside the room where the man was shot?"

"Never."

"That little table in the room, now. You said it was a round table. Was it also a three-legged table?"

"Didn't I tell you it was? But please listen to me," begged Rodman, as though he had not been able to get in a word edgewise. "If a man was killed there, who was he? I've questioned people till I'm blue in the face, and nobody ever saw him or heard of him. Where's his body? And how was it done? And did Hartley kill him? I ask you, as a public servant, to answer relevant questions, if you can think of any answer. What difference does it make whether the table had three legs or four legs? Or whether the room had one door or two doors or six doors, for that matter?"

"On the contrary," said Colonel March, "the number

of doors is very important. If there had been only one door in the room, the criminal would not have been able to act."

"But I tell you nobody went in or out by any of the doors!"

"Oh, that," said Colonel March. "I quite agree with you."

"Then ——"

"No, you don't," said the other, with ferocious geniality. He pointed his finger. "You're enjoying yourself immensely. You never got such a thrill in your life as you've had out of this. You came here with the particular purpose of mystifying me, to spread the glad tidings of terror to a wider audience than Mrs. Atchison; and now you're damned well going over the same jumps you set for me . . . Ask Mr. and Mrs. Hartley to come in."

It might be wondered how Rodman's description of this couple coincided with the facts. It is possible that his account of Mrs. Hartley, at least, was coloured by a romantic imagination. Betty Hartley did not seem ethereal or spiritual. She was a good-looking, healthy-looking girl whose grave hazel eyes were redeemed by dimples at the corners of the mouth; a brown velour hat was tilted over her thick yellow hair. Her husband, peering over her shoulder, had rather a strong face with a trace of irony in it. They both stopped dead on the threshold when they saw Rodman.

"Oh, bother!" said the girl explosively.

"Come in," said Colonel March, teetering before the fire. "Come in and sit down. This is Inspector Roberts. The other one I think you know. Mr. Rodman

had been telling us a very interesting story——”

“I don’t doubt it,” observed Hartley with an air of gloom. “Well, what do you think?”

“I think,” said Colonel March, “that you were very foolish to come here.”

Rodman had been right about one thing, at least: Betty Hartley was afraid.

“He insisted on coming,” she said. “I told him not to come. I begged him not to, though not for the reason you may be thinking. We came here to give our version of what happened the other night. But since Mr. Rodman has been good enough to——”

“My dear young lady,” said Rodman, as though he were beginning a letter. He tried to soften this. “Please see, try to see, that I am acting in your own interests. Look at you: you’re trembling. I have always made my own decisions in this life, and——”

Betty Hartley spoke fretfully. She said: “Oh, dry up!”

“As for me,” remarked Hartley with a cheerful air, “I hold by the *corpus delicti*. I wouldn’t like to swear how the thing works, but I know it gives a devil of a lot of trouble in detective stories. You can’t hang me until you can produce the victim’s teeth or whiskers. And I hope, conversely, that I’m not to blame if a ghost walks on the premises.” His tone changed, and he looked up. “Why was I foolish to come here?”

Colonel March’s voice became sharp.

“Because, if I know your symptoms at all, you ought to be at home in bed,” March answered. “You must have a nasty bullet-wound in your shoulder where your wife shot you last night.”

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There was a silence of such bursting quality that they even became aware of dim outer noises in the building: the passing of footsteps or the closing of a door. It took a little time for the words to sink in. Mr. Horace Rodman got to his feet, and sat down again. He has since described (to Mrs. Atchison) that he has seldom been so taken aback in his life — especially at the scared face of Betty Hartley. But he was just as taken aback by the subsequent amusement. Hartley had sat down, looking less ill. And both Hartley and Colonel March were chuckling.

“So you spotted it,” said Hartley. “Well, thank the Lord for that.”

“Furthermore,” insisted the Colonel, with an expression of great pleasure nevertheless, “if you don’t put your arm back in that sling again, you’ll get into serious trouble with the doctor. Mrs. Hartley, I beg your pardon. I know the shooting wasn’t a part of the game, but I hardly think you’ll get into any difficulty over —”

“I don’t see how you can stand there and laugh,” cried the girl. “It was horrible. And you don’t understand! I——”

“I hope I understand,” said the Colonel. He turned to Hartley. “You’re a theatrical producer, aren’t you?”

“And doing well,” agreed the other with decision. “Two fairly good runs in two years. Not West End, maybe. But wait! So you’d heard of me, eh? Which one did you see, *The Riddle in Red* or *Dead Voices*?”

Colonel March was apologetic.

“As a matter of fact, neither. Mr. Rodman’s painstaking account of your talk made it seem likely, and *you* said, ‘Look at this door. It’s a practical door.’ The choice of term was distinctive. A *practical* door or window,

meaning a real one, is a word used exclusively in stage terminology. The big box of framed photographs suggested the theatre, as the sheets of printed paper suggested playbills. But when I heard about the long triangular indentation in the pile of the carpet, just as used by your famous predecessor, I felt sure you were trying out a variation of the original illusion. D'you mind telling me what you were up to?"

"Stage version of *The Invisible Man*," replied Hartley with enthusiasm. "Never been done. And I can do it. Look! If I take——" He broke off. "You know the basis of the trick?"

"It deserves to be mentioned with reverence," said March, in equal enthusiasm. "It is a variation of the first really revolutionary stage-illusion of modern times. The magician and illusionist, Colonel Stodare, presented it first as 'The Sphinx' in 1865. On the same principle the great Maskelyne built his Disappearing Cabinet, and it has been the foundation of nearly every ghost-illusion since.

"This is how 'The Sphinx' was presented. In the middle of three sides of a black-draped stage stood a circular table with three legs. On this table appeared a severed head without a body. It talked, answered questions and so on; yet the audience could see over, under, and through the table to assure themselves there was no person there. Ah, you remember it? Now imagine a square, which is the stage. In the centre of the square imagine a triangle, formed by the three legs of the table, with its apex or point towards the audience. In each of the two long sides of the triangle—towards the audience—is set a looking-glass. You think you are seeing under the table to the

back wall. What you actually see is the reflection of the two side walls and floor, similar black curtains and carpeting, coming together to form a perfect whole. The invisible body, of course, is hidden by the two sheets of looking-glass.

"You, Mr. Hartley, made an ingenious improvement on it. Your room had three white-painted doors, exactly the same on three sides. Your Sphinx-table stood in the middle. One of the looking-glasses would reflect half of the under part of the door on the right; the other would reflect half of the under part of the door on the left. The walls were the same; carpet was fitted up to the baseboards. A watcher opposite would apparently see under the table—to the rear wall, carpet, and rear door: which door was really the fitted-together reflection of the doors on either side.

"In your sinister Crippen role, evilly moustached, you had to take certain precautions. You had to wait until you were in the room, until you had put down gloves and pistol on the table and moved to the window, before you could turn on the light. Otherwise you would have been seen smack in the looking-glass. Afterwards a pair of gloves, ably played by your wife and helpmeet, could be made to appear above the table and perform what antics they liked. The invisible man!"

Hartley made a gesture of silent applause. Betty Hartley was almost in tears. But by this time Mr. Horace Rodman had reached a point of hysteria.

"Illusion!" he howled. "Don't tell me I saw an illusion. I won't believe it. I won't have it. A real bullet broke my window. It nearly killed me. But it went through their window without——"

"You play this one," Hartley said politely to Colonel March.

"Thank you," said the Colonel. "Correct me if I am wrong: that was an error; that was not intended, any more than you were intended to be shot." He turned to Rodman. "I rather think that part of it is clear, from your own recital. When you went bursting into their flat that night, it was very cold in the little room. You particularly commented to me on how cold it was. But there was a radiator in that room, and the flat was centrally heated throughout. In the next breath you explained how you went into the sitting-room, where it was quite warm. Am I being deeply subtle if I suggest that it was cold because the window—or one pane of it—had been open for some little time? You pointed out that several panes of those long windows open out like little doors. The terrible moustached figure opened one pane, stuck his head out, and whistled to attract your attention in case he hadn't already done so. He left it a few inches open, and didn't think to lock it again until you broke in with the policeman some time afterwards. I rather think that is how the bullet crept out."

Hartley was nursing his arm and musing.

"My dear old Grandpop," he said, "the most villainous-looking old coot who ever carried a collection-plate in church. I have impersonated him, under the stimulus of his picture, in several repertory-productions where some seedy thug is——"

"I think I must be going mad," Rodman interrupted, staring at Colonel March. "What did I hear you say? 'Whistled to attract my attention?' Attract *my* attention? Why?"

Hartley looked politely at his wife.

"And *you* play this one," he said.

"I will," said Betty, seeming to bristle up inside. She turned on Rodman. "Do you know what you are?"

"My dear young lady——"

The dear young lady rose in a glory of rage.

"Do you know what you've been doing, you and your precious Mrs. Atchison? Do you deny you've been snooping and spying on us, just as you do on everyone else you can, only worse, ever since we've moved into that flat? You've tried to find out everything about us you can. You've stood up there with a pair of field-glasses and followed me from room to room, making life a perfect misery to me. I'll bet ——"

("Better see that the door is closed," Colonel March said to Hartley.)

"—and, since we were going to test the mirror-illusion anyway, I thought we'd just teach you a jolly good lesson, and scare your hair off. I suppose it's all my fault, really. I thought that was a property-gun, loaded with blanks. Only it wasn't. And I'm glad I broke your beastly old window, anyway. But when we saw what an awful row we'd caused with real shots, we had to pretend it didn't happen, or you'd have had us in the police-court for shooting at you. Jim would have had to explain what he was about, and ruined the play ——"

"Light of my life ——" began her husband pacifically.

"And, of course, Jim would go on. I had to hold you off while he got rid of the grandfather make-up and slid the mirrors out from the grooves in the table and hid them, and closed the window. Oh, I don't mind anything else; but I can't forgive you for being so virtuous and

triumphant when you grabbed that photograph, and saw Jim slip and land with his full weight on the carpet just after he'd g-got a bullet——”

“You'll have to say it another time, Mrs. Hartley,” said Inspector Roberts, looking out of the open door. “Mr. Rodman seems to have left us in a hurry.”

She grew calmer, and grinned impishly. “That's off my chest, anyhow. I'm terribly sorry, though. Can he prosecute us?”

“Somehow,” said Hartley, “I don't think he will. When this story begins to circulate—no, I don't think he will. With regard to his future conduct, too; when the butcher and the candle-stick-maker hear their version of his heroic conduct, he will be——”

Colonel March nodded magnificently, like an emperor.

“Exactly,” he said. “The real invisible man.”

The Footprint in the Sky

SHE awoke out of confused dreams; awoke with a start, and lay staring at the white ceiling of her bedroom for a minute or two before she could convince herself it was anything but a dream.

But it was a dream.

The cold, brittle sunlight poured in at the open window. The cold, brittle air, blowing the curtains, stirred a light coating of snow on the window-sill. It stirred briskly in that little, bare room; it should have set the blood racing, and Dorothy Brant breathed it deeply.

Everything was all right. She was at the country cottage, where she and Dad and Harry had come down for the skating on the frozen lake; possibly even a little mild ski-ing, if the snow came on according to the weather forecast. And the snow had fallen. She should have been glad of that, though for some reason the sight of it on the window-sill struck her with a kind of terror.

Shivering in the warm bed, the clothes pulled up about her chin, she looked at the little clock on her bedside. Twenty minutes past nine. She had overslept; Dad and Harry would be wanting their breakfast. Again she told herself that everything was all right: though now, fully awake, she knew it was not. The unpleasantness of yesterday returned. Mrs. Topham next door—that old shrew and thief as well . . .

It was the only thing which could have marred this

week-end. They had looked forward to the skating: the crisp blades thudding and ringing on the ice, the flight, the long scratching drag as you turned, the elm-trees black against a clear cold sky. But there was Mrs. Topham with her stolen watch and her malicious good manners, huddled up in the cottage next door and spoiling everything.

Put it out of your mind! No good brooding over it: put it out of your mind!

Dorothy Brant braced herself and got out of bed, reaching for her dressing-gown and slippers. But it was not her dressing-gown she found draped across the chair; it was her heavy fur coat. And there were a pair of soft-leather slippers. They were a pair of soft-leather moccasins, ornamented with bead-work, which Harry had brought her back from the States; but now the undersides were cold, damp, and stiff, almost frozen. That was when a subconscious fear struck at her, took possession, and would not leave.

Closing the window, she padded out to the bathroom. The small cottage, with its crisp white curtains and smell of old wood, was so quiet that she could hear voices talking downstairs. It was a mumble in which no words were distinguishable: Harry's quick tenor, her father's slower and heavier voice, and another she could not identify, but which was slowest and heaviest of all.

What was wrong? She hurried through her bath and through her dressing. Not only were they up but they must be getting their own breakfast, for she could smell coffee boiling. And she was very slow; in spite of nine hours' sleep she felt as edgy and washed-out as though she had been up all night.

Giving a last jerk of the comb through her brown bobbed hair, putting on no powder or lipstick, she ran downstairs. At the door of the living-room she stopped abruptly. Inside were her father, her cousin Harry, and the local Superintendent of Police.

"Good morning, miss," said the Superintendent.

She never forgot the look of that little room or the look on the faces of those in it. Sunlight poured into it, touching the bright-coloured rough-woven rugs, the rough stone fireplace. Through side windows she could see out across the snow-covered lawn to where—twenty yards away and separated from them only by a tall laurel hedge, with a gateway—was Mrs. Topham's white weather-boarded cottage.

But what struck her with a shock of alarm as she came into the room was the sense of a conversation suddenly cut off; the look she surprised on their faces when they glanced round, quick and sallow, as a camera might have surprised it.

"Good morning, miss," repeated Superintendent Mason saluting.

Harry Ventnor intervened, in a kind of agony. His naturally high colour was higher still; even his large feet and bulky shoulders, his small sinewy hands, looked agitated.

"Don't say anything, Dolly!" he urged. "Don't say anything! They can't make you say anything. Wait until——"

"I certainly think——" began her father slowly. He looked down his nose, and then along the side of his pipe, everywhere except at Dorothy. "I certainly think," he went on, clearing his throat, "that it

would be as well not to speak hastily until——”

“*If* you please, sir,” said Superintendent Mason, clearing his own throat. “Now, miss, I’m afraid I must ask you some questions. But it is my duty to tell you that you need not answer my questions until you have seen your solicitor.”

“Solicitor? But I don’t want a solicitor. What on earth should I want with a solicitor?”

Superintendent Mason looked meaningly at her father and Harry Ventnor, as though bidding them to mark that.

“It’s about Mrs. Topham, miss.”

“Oh!”

“Why do you say ‘Oh’?”

“Go on, please. What is it?”

“I understand, miss, that you and Mrs. Topham had ‘words’ yesterday? A bit of a dust-up, like?”

“Yes, you could certainly call it that.”

“May I ask what about?”

“I’m sorry,” said Dorothy; “I can’t tell you that. It would only give the old cat an opportunity to say I had been slandering her. So that’s it! What has she been telling you?”

“Why, miss,” said Superintendent Mason, taking out a pencil and scratching the side of his jaw with it, “I’m afraid she’s not exactly in a condition to tell us anything. She’s in a nursing-home at Guildford, rather badly smashed up round the head. Just between ourselves, it’s touch and go whether she’ll recover.”

First Dorothy could not feel her heart beating at all, and then it seemed to pound with enormous rhythm. The Superintendent was looking at her steadily. She forced herself to say:

"You mean she's had an accident?"

"Not exactly, miss. The doctor says she was hit three or four times with that big glass paper-weight you may have seen on the table at her cottage. Eh?"

"You don't mean—you don't mean somebody *did* it? Deliberately? But who did it?"

"Well, miss," said Superintendent Mason, looking at her still harder until he became a huge Puritan face with a small mole beside his nose. "I'm bound to tell you that by everything we can see so far, it looks as though you did it."

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This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. She afterwards remembered, in a detached kind of way, studying all of them: the little lines round Harry's eyes in the sunlight, the hastily brushed light hair, the loose leather wind-jacket whose zip fastener was half undone. She remembered thinking that despite his athletic prowess he looked ineffectual and a little foolish. But then her own father was not of much use now.

She heard her own voice.

"But that's absurd!"

"I hope so, miss. I honestly hope so. Now tell me: were you out of this house last night?"

"When?"

"At any time."

"Yes. No. I don't know. Yes, I think I was."

"For God's sake, Dolly," said her father, "don't say anything more until we've got a lawyer here. I've telephoned to town; I didn't want to alarm you; I didn't even wake you: there's some explanation of this. There must be!"

It was not her own emotion; it was the wretchedness of his face which held her. Bulky, semi-bald, worried about business, worried about everything else in this world, that was John Brant. His crippled left arm and black glove were pressed against his side. He stood in the bright pool of sunlight, a face of misery.

"I've—seen her," he explained. "It wasn't pretty, that wasn't. Not that I haven't seen worse. In the war." He touched his arm. "But you're a little girl, Dolly; you're only a little girl. You couldn't have done that."

His plaintive tone asked for confirmation.

"Just one moment, sir," interposed Superintendent Mason. "Now, miss! You tell me you *were* outside the house last night?"

"Yes."

"In the snow?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Do you remember the time?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Tell me, miss: what size shoes do you wear?"

"Four."

"That's a rather small size, isn't it?" When she nodded dumbly, Superintendent Mason shut up his notebook. "Now, if you'll just come with me?"

The cottage had a side door. Without putting his fingers on the knob, Mason twisted the spindle round and opened it. The overhang of the eaves had kept clear the two steps leading down; but beyond a thin coating of snow lay like a plaster over the world between here and the shuttered cottage across the way.

There were two strings of footprints in that snow. Dorothy knew whose they were. Hardened and sharp-

printed, one set of prints moved out snakily from the steps, passed under the arch of the powdered laurel-hedge, and stopped at the steps to the side door of Mrs. Topham's house. Another set of the same tracks—a little blurred, spaced at longer intervals where the person had evidently been running desperately—came back from the cottage to these steps.

That mute sign of panic stirred Dorothy's memory. It wasn't a dream. She had done it. Subconsciously she had known it all the time. She could remember other things: the fur coat clasped round her pyjamas, the sting of the snow to wet slippers, the blind rush in the dark.

"Yours, miss?" inquired Superintendent Mason.

"Yes. Oh, yes, they're mine."

"Easy, miss," muttered the Superintendent. "You're looking a bit white round the gills. Come in here and sit down; I won't hurt you." Then his own tone grew petulant. Or perhaps something in the heavy simplicity of the girl's manner penetrated his official bearing. "But why did you do it, miss? Lord, why did you do it? That's to say, breaking open that desk of hers to get a handful of trinkets not worth ten quid for the lot? And then not even taking the trouble to mess up your footprints afterwards!" He coughed, checking himself abruptly.

John Brant's voice was acid. "Good, my friend. Very good. The first sign of intelligence so far. I presume you don't suggest my daughter is insane?"

"No, sir. But they were her mother's trinkets, I hear."

"Where did you hear that? You, I suppose, Harry?"

Harry Ventnor pulled up the zip fastener of his wind-jacket as though girding himself. He seemed to suggest that he was the good fellow whom everybody was

persecuting; that he wanted to be friends with the world, if they would only let him. Yet such sincerity blazed in his small features that it was difficult to doubt his good intentions.

"Now look here, Dad, old boy. I *had* to tell them, didn't I? It's no good trying to hide things like that. I know that, just from reading those stories —"

"Stories!"

"All right: say what you like. They always find out, and then they make it worse than it really was." He let this sink in. "I tell you, you're going about it in the wrong way. Suppose Dolly did have a row with the Topham about that jewellery? Suppose she *did* go over there last night? Suppose those are her footprints? Does that prove she bashed the Topham? Not that a public service wasn't done; but why couldn't it have been a burglar just as well?"

Superintendent Mason shook his head.

"Because it couldn't, sir."

"But why? I'm asking you, why?"

"There's no harm in telling you that, sir, if you'll just listen. You probably remember that it began to snow last night at a little past eleven o'clock."

"No, I don't. We were all in bed by then."

"Well, you can take my word for it," Mason told him patiently. "I was up half the night at the police station; and it did. It stopped snowing about midnight. You'll have to take my word for that too, but we can easily prove it. You see, sir, Mrs. Topham was alive and in very good health at well after midnight. I know that too, because she rang up the police station and said she was awake and nervous and thought there were burglars in

the neighbourhood. Since the lady does that same thing," he explained with a certain grimness, "on the average of about three times a month, I don't stress *that*. What I am telling you is that her call came in at 12.10, at least ten minutes after the snow had stopped."

Harry hesitated, and the Superintendent went on with the same patient air:

"Don't you see it, sir? Mrs. Topham wasn't attacked until after the snow stopped. Round her cottage now there's twenty yards of clean, clear, unmarked snow in every direction. The only marks in that snow, the only marks of any kind at all, are the footprints Miss Brant admits she made herself."

Then he rose at them in exasperation.

"'Tisn't as though anybody else could have made the tracks. Even if Miss Brant didn't admit it herself, I'm absolutely certain nobody else did. You, Mr. Ventnor, wear size ten shoes. Mr. Brant wears size nine. Walk in size four tracks? Ayagh! And yet somebody did get into that cottage with a key, bashed the old lady pretty murderously, robbed her desk, and got away again. If there are no other tracks or marks of any kind in the snow, who did it? Who must have done it?"

Dorothy could consider it, now, in almost a detached way. She remembered the paper-weight with which Mrs. Topham had been struck. It lay on the table in Mrs. Topham's stuffy parlour, a heavy glass globe with a tiny landscape inside. When you shook the glass globe, a miniature snowstorm rose within—which seemed to make the attack more horrible.

She wondered if she had left any fingerprints on it. But over everything rose Renée Topham's

face, Renée Topham, her mother's bosom friend.

"I hated her," said Dorothy; and, unexpectedly, she began to cry.

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Dennis Jameson, of the law-firm of Morris, Farnsworth & Jameson, Lincoln's Inn Fields, shut up his brief-case with a snap. He was putting on his hat and coat when Billy Farnsworth looked into the office.

"Hullo!" said Farnsworth. "You off to Surrey over that Brant business?"

"Yes."

"H'm. Believe in miracles, do you?"

"No."

"That girl's guilty, my lad. You ought to know that."

"It's our business," said Jameson, "to do what we can for our clients."

Farnsworth looked at him shrewdly. "I see it in your ruddy cheek. Quixotry is alive again. Young idealist storms to relief of good-looker in distress, swearing to —"

"I've met her twice," said Jameson. "I like her, yes. But, merely using a small amount of intelligence on this, I can't see that they've got such a thundering good case against her."

"Oh, my lad!"

"Well, look at it. What do they say the girl did? This Mrs. Topham was struck several times with a glass paper-weight. There are no fingerprints on the paper-weight, which shows signs of having been wiped. But, after having the forethought to wipe her fingerprints carefully off the paper-weight, Dorothy Brant then walks back to her cottage and leaves behind two sets of

footprints which could be seen by aerial observation a mile up. Is that reasonable?"

Farnsworth looked thoughtful.

"Maybe they would say she isn't reasonable," he pointed out. "Never mind the psychology. What you've got to get round are the physical facts. Here is the mysterious widow Topham entirely alone in the house; the only servant comes in by day. Here are one person's footprints. Only that girl could have made the tracks; and, in fact, admits she did. It's a physical impossibility for anybody else to have entered or left the house. How do you propose to get round that?"

"I don't know," said Jameson rather hopelessly. "But I want to hear her side of it first. The only thing nobody seems to have heard, or even to be curious about, is what she thinks herself."

Yet, when he met her at the cottage late that afternoon, she cut the ground from under his feet.

Twilight was coming down when he turned in at the gate, a bluish twilight in which the snow looked grey. Jameson stopped a moment at the gate, and stared across at the thin laurel-hedge dividing this property from Mrs. Topham's. There was nothing remarkable about this hedge, which was some six feet high and cut through by a gateway like a Gothic arch. But in front of the arch, peering up at the snow-coated side of the hedge just above it, stood a large figure in cap and waterproof. Somehow he looked familiar. At his elbow another man, evidently the local Superintendent of Police, was holding up a camera; and a flash-bulb glared against the sky. Though he was too far away to hear anything, Jameson had a queer impression that the large man was laughing uproariously.

Harry Ventnor, whom he knew slightly, met Jameson at the door.

"She's in there," Harry explained, nodding towards the front room. "Er—don't upset her, will you? Here, what the devil are they doing with that hedge?"

He stared across the lawn.

"Upset her?" said Jameson with some asperity. "I'm here, if possible, to help her. Won't you or Mr. Brant give some assistance? Do you honestly think that Miss Brant in her rational senses could have done what they say she did?"

"In her rational senses?" repeated Harry. After looking at Jameson in a curious way, he said no more; he turned abruptly and hurried off across the lawn.

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Yet Dorothy, when Jameson met her, gave no impression of being out of her rational senses. It was her straightforwardness he had always liked, the straightforwardness which warmed him now. They sat in the homely, firelit room, by the fireplace over which were the silver cups to denote Harry's athletic and gymnastic prowess, and the trophies of John Brant's earlier days at St. Moritz. Dorothy herself was an outdoor girl.

"To advise me?" she said. "You mean, to advise me what to say when they arrest me?"

"Well, they haven't arrested you yet, Miss Brant."

She smiled at him. "And yet I'll bet that surprises you, doesn't it? Oh, I know how deeply I'm in! I suppose they're only poking about to get more evidence. And then there's a new man here, a man named March, from Scotland Yard. I feel almost flattered."

Jameson sat up. He knew now why that immense figure by the hedge had seemed familiar.

"Not Colonel March?"

"Yes. Rather a nice person, really," answered Dorothy, shading her eyes with her hand. Under her light tone he felt that her nerves were raw. "Then again, they've been all through my room. And they can't find the watch and the brooch and the rings I'm supposed to have stolen from Aunt Renée Topham. Aunt Renée!"

"So I've heard. But that's the point: what are they getting at? A watch and a brooch and a couple of rings! Why should you steal that from anybody, let alone her?"

"Because they weren't hers," said Dorothy, suddenly looking up with a white face, and speaking very fast. "They belonged to my mother."

"Steady."

"My mother is dead," said Dorothy. "I suppose it wasn't just the watch and the rings, really. That was the excuse, the breaking-point, the thing that brought it on. My mother was a great friend of Mrs. Topham. It was 'Aunt Renée' this and 'Aunt Renée' that, while my mother was alive to pamper her. But my mother wanted me to have those trinkets, such as they were. And Aunt Renée Topham coolly appropriated them, as she appropriates everything else she can. I never knew what had happened to them until yesterday."

"Do you know that kind of woman? Mrs. Topham is really charming, aristocratic and charming, with the cool charm that takes all it can get and expects to go on getting it. I know for a fact that she's really got a lot of money, though what she does with it I can't imagine: and the real reason why she buries herself in the country is that

she's too mean to risk spending it in town. I never could endure her. Then, when my mother died and I didn't go on pampering Aunt Renée as she thought I should, it was a very different thing. How that woman loves to talk about us! Harry's debts, and my father's shaky business. And *me*."

She checked herself again, smiling at him. "I'm sorry to inflict all this on you."

"You're not inflicting anything on me."

"But it's rather ridiculous, isn't it?"

"'Ridiculous,'" said Jameson grimly, "is not the word I should apply to it. So you had a row with her?"

"Oh, a glorious row. A beautiful row. The grandmother of all rows."

"When?"

"Yesterday. When I saw her wearing my mother's watch."

She looked at the fire, over which the silver cups glimmered.

"Maybe I said more than I should have," she went on. "But I got no support from my father or Harry. I don't blame Dad: he's so worried about business, and that bad arm of his troubles him so much sometimes, that all he wants is peace and quiet. As for Harry, *he* doesn't really like her; but she took rather a fancy to him, and that flatters him. He's a kind of male counterpart of Aunt Renée. Out of a job? -well, depend on somebody else. And I'm in the middle of all this. It's 'Dolly, do this,' and 'Dolly, do that,' and 'Good old Dolly; she won't mind.' But I do mind. When I saw that woman standing there wearing my mother's watch, and saying commiserating things about the fact that we couldn't afford a

servant, I felt that something ought to be done about it. So I suppose I must have done something about it."

Jameson reached out and took her hands. "All right," he said. "Did you do it?"

"I don't know! That's just the trouble."

"But surely——"

"No. That was one of the things Mrs. Topham always had such sport with. You don't know much about anything when you walk in your sleep."

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" she went on, after another pause. "Utterly ludicrous. But not to me! Not a bit. Ever since I was a child, when I've been over-tired or nervously exhausted, it's happened. Once I came downstairs and built and lit a fire in the dining-room, and set the table for a meal. I admit it doesn't happen often, and never before with results like this." She tried to laugh. "But why do you think my father and Harry looked at me like that? That's the worst of it. I really-don't know whether I'm a near-murderer or not."

This was bad.

Jameson admitted that to himself, even as his reason argued against it. He got up to prowling round the room, and her brown eyes never left him. He could not look away; he saw the tenseness of her face in every corner.

"Look here," he said quietly; "this is nonsense."

"Oh, please. Don't you say that. It's not very original."

"But do you seriously think you went for that woman and still don't know anything about it now?"

"Would it be more difficult than building a fire?"

"I didn't ask you that. *Do* you think you did it?"

"No," said Dorothy.

That question did it. She trusted him now. There was understanding and sympathy between them, a mental force and communication that could be felt as palpably as the body gives out heat.

"Deep down inside me, no, I don't believe it. I think I should have waked up. And there was no——well, no blood on me, you know. But how are you going to get round the evidence?"

(The evidence. Always the evidence.)

"I did go across there. I can't deny that. I remember half waking up as I was coming back. I was standing in the middle of the lawn in the snow. I had on my fur coat over my pyjamas; I remember feeling snow on my face and my wet slippers under me. I was shivering. And I remember running back. That's all. If I didn't do it, how could anybody else have done it?"

"I beg your pardon," interposed a new voice. "Do you mind if, both figuratively and literally, I turn on the light?"

Dennis Jameson knew the owner of that voice. There was the noise of someone fumbling after an electric switch; then, in homely light, Colonel March beamed and basked. Colonel March's seventeen stone was swathed round in a water-proof as big as a tent. He wore a large tweed cap. Under this his speckled face glowed in the cold; and he was smoking, with gurgling relish, the large-bowled pipe which threatened to singe his sandy moustache.

"Ah, Jameson!" he said. He took the pipe out of his mouth and made a gesture with it. "So it *was* you. I thought I saw you come in. I don't want to intrude; but I think there are at least two things that Miss Brant ought to know."

Dorothy turned round quickly.

"First," pursued Colonel March, "that Mrs. Topham is out of danger. She is at least able, like an after-dinner speaker, to say a few words; though with about as much coherence. Second, that out on your lawn there is one of the queerest objects I ever saw in my life."

Jameson whistled.

"You've met this fellow?" he said to Dorothy. "He is the head of the Queer Complaints Department. When they come across something outlandish, which may be a hoax or a joke but, on the other hand, may be a serious crime, they shout for him. His mind is so obvious that he hits it every time. To my certain knowledge he has investigated a disappearing room, chased a walking corpse, and found an invisible piece of furniture. If he goes so far as to admit that a thing is a bit unusual, you can look out for squalls."

Colonel March nodded quite seriously.

"Yes," he said. "That is why I am here, you see. They thought we might be interested in that footprint."

"That footprint?" cried Dorothy. "You mean —?"

"No, no; not your footprint, Miss Brant. Another one. Let me explain. I want you, both of you, to look out of that window; I want you to take a look at the laurel-hedge between this cottage and the other. The light is almost gone, but study it."

Jameson went to the window and peered out.

"Well?" he demanded. "What about it? It's a hedge."

"As you so shrewdly note, it is a hedge. Now let me ask you a question. Do you think a person could walk along the top of that hedge?"

"Good lord, no!"

"No? Why not?"

"I don't see the joke," said Jameson, "but I'll make the proper replies. Because the hedge is only an inch or two thick. It wouldn't support a cat. If you tried to stand on it, you'd come through like a ton of bricks."

"Quite true. Then what would you say if I told you that someone weighing at least twelve stone must have climbed up the side of it?"

Nobody answered him; the thing was so obviously unreasonable that nobody could answer. Dorothy Brant and Dennis Jameson looked at each other.

"For," said Colonel March, "it would seem that somebody at least climbed up there. Look at the hedge again. You see the arch cut in it for a gate? Just above that, in the snow along the side of the hedge, there are traces of a footprint. It is a large footprint. I think it can be identified by the heel, though most of it is blurred and sketchy."

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Walking quickly and heavily, Dorothy's father came into the room. He started to speak, but seemed to change his mind at the sight of Colonel March. He went over to Dorothy, who took his arm.

"Then," insisted Jameson, "somebody did climb up on the hedge?"

"I doubt it," said Colonel March. "How could he?"

Jameson pulled himself together.

"Look here, sir," he said quietly. "'How could he?' is correct. I never knew you to go on like this without good reason. I know it must have some bearing on the case. But I don't care if somebody climbed up on the hedge. I don't care if he danced the Big Apple on it. The hedge

leads nowhere. It doesn't lead to Mrs. Topham's; it only divides the two properties. The point is, how did somebody manage to get from here to that other cottage—across sixty feet of unbroken snow—without leaving a trace on it? I ask you that because I'm certain you don't think Miss Brant is guilty."

Colonel March looked apologetic.

"I know she isn't," he answered.

In Dorothy Brant's mind was again that vision of the heavy globed paper-weight inside which, as you shook it, a miniature snowstorm arose. She felt that her own wits were being shaken and clouded in the same way.

"I knew Dolly didn't do it," said John Brant, suddenly putting his arm round his daughter's shoulder. "I knew that. I told them so. But——"

Colonel March silenced him.

"The real thief, Miss Brant, did not want your mother's watch and brooch and chain and rings. It may interest you to know what he did want. He wanted about fifteen hundred pounds in notes and gold sovereigns, tucked away in that same shabby desk. You seem to have wondered what Mrs. Topham did with her money. That is what she did with it. Mrs. Topham, by the first words she could get out in semi-consciousness, was merely a common or garden variety of miser. That dull-looking desk in her parlour was the last place any burglar would look for a hoard. Any burglar, that is, except one."

"Except one?" repeated John Brant, and his eyes seemed to turn inwards.

A sudden ugly suspicion came to Jameson.

"Except one who knew, yes. You, Miss Brant, had the blame deliberately put on you. There was no malice in it.

It was simply the easiest way to avoid pain and trouble to the gentleman who did it.

"Now hear what you really did," said Colonel March, his face darkening. "You did go out into the snow last night. But you did not go over to Mrs. Topham's; and you did not make those two artistic sets of footprints in the snow. When you tell us in your own story that you felt snow sting on your face as well as underfoot, it requires no vast concentration, surely, to realize that the snow was still falling. You went out into it, like many sleep-walkers; you were shocked into semi-consciousness by the snow and the cold air; and you returned long before the end of the snowfall, which covered any real prints you may have made.

"The real thief—who was very much awake—heard you come back and tumble into bed. He saw a heaven-sent opportunity to blame you for a crime you might even think you had committed. He slipped in and took the slippers out of your room. And, when the snow had stopped, he went across to Mrs. Topham's. He did not mean to attack her. But she was awake and surprised him; and so, of course, Harry Ventnor struck her down."

"Harry——"

The word, which Dorothy had said almost at a scream, was checked. She looked round quickly at her father; she stared straight ahead; and then she began to laugh.

"Of course," said Colonel March. "As usual, he was letting his (what is it?) his 'good old Dolly' take the blame."

A great cloud seemed to have left John Brant; but the fussed and worried look had not left him. He blinked at Colonel March.

"Sir," he said, "I would give my good arm to prove what you say. That boy has caused me half the trouble I ever had. But are you raving mad?"

"No."

"I tell you he couldn't have done it! He's Emily's son, my sister's son. He may be a bad lot; but he's not a magician."

"You are forgetting," said Colonel March, "a certain large size-ten footprint. You are forgetting that interesting sight, a smeared and blurred size-ten footprint on the side of a hedge which would not have held up a cat. A remarkable footprint. A disembodied footprint."

"But that's the whole trouble," roared the other. "The two lines of tracks in the snow were made by a size four shoe. Harry couldn't have made them, any more than I could. It's a physical impossibility. Harry wears size ten. You don't say he could get his feet into flat leather moccasins which would fit my daughter?"

"No," said Colonel March. "But he could get his hands into them."

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There was a silence. The Colonel wore a dreamy look; almost a pleased look.

"And in this unusual but highly practical pair of gloves," he went on, "Harry Ventnor simply walked across to the other cottage on his hands. No more than that. For a trained gymnast (as those silver cups will indicate) it was nothing. For a rattle-brained gentleman who needed money it was ideal. He crossed in a thin coating of snow, which would show no difference in weight. Doorsteps, cleared of snow by the overhanging

roof, protected him at either end when he stood upright. He had endless opportunities to get a key to the side door. Unfortunately, there was that rather low archway in the hedge. Carrying himself on his hands, his feet were curved up and back over the arch of his body to balance him; he blundered, and smeared that disembodied footprint on the side of the hedge. To be quite frank, I am delighted with the device. It is crime upside down; it is leaving a footprint in the sky; it is——”

“A fair cop, sir,” concluded Superintendent Mason, sticking his head in at the door. “They got him on the other side of Guildford. He must have smelled something wrong when he saw us taking photographs. But he had the stuff on him.”

Dorothy Brant stood looking for a long time at the large, untidy blimp-like man who was still chuckling with pleasure. Then she joined in.

“I trust,” observed Dennis Jameson politely, “that everybody is having a good time. For myself, I’ve had a couple of unpleasant shocks to-day; and just for a moment I was afraid I should have another one. For a moment I honestly thought you were going to pitch on Mr. Brant.”

“So did I,” agreed Dorothy, and beamed at her father. “That’s why it’s so funny now.”

John Brant looked startled. But not half so startled as Colonel March.

“Now there,” the Colonel said, “I honestly do not understand you. I am the Department of Queer Complaints. If you have a ghost in your attic or a footprint on top of your hedge, ring me up. But a certain success has blessed us because, as Mr. Jameson says, I look for

the obvious. And Lord love us' if you have decided that a crime was committed by a gentleman who could walk on his hands, I will hold under torture that you are not likely to succeed by suspecting the one person in the house who has a crippled arm."

The Crime in Nobody's Room

BANDS were playing and seven suns were shining; but this took place entirely in the head and heart of Mr. Ronald Denham. He beamed on the car-park attendant at the Regency Club, who assisted him into the taxi. He beamed on the taxi-driver. He beamed on the night porter who helped him out at his flat in Sloane Street, and he felt an irresistible urge to hand banknotes to everyone in sight.

Now, Ronald Denham would have denied that he had taken too many drinks. It was true that he had attended an excellent bachelor party, to celebrate Jimmy Bellchester's wedding. But Denham would have maintained that he was upheld by spiritual things; and he had proved his exalted temperance by leaving the party at a time when many of the guests were still present.

As he had pointed out in a speech, it was only a month before his own wedding to Miss Anita Bruce. Anita, in fact, lived in the same block of flats and on the same floor as himself. This fact gave him great pleasure on the way home. Like most of us, Denham in this mood felt a strong urge to wake people up in the middle of the night and talk to them. He wondered whether he ought to wake up Anita. But in his reformed state he decided against it, and felt like a saint. He would not even wake up Tom Evans, who shared the flat with him though that stern young business man usually worked

so late at the office that Denham got in before he did.

At a few minutes short of midnight, then, Denham steered his way into the foyer of Medici Court. Pearson, the night porter, followed him to the automatic lift.

"Everything all right, sir?" inquired Pearson in a stage whisper. Denham assured him that it was, and that he was an excellent fellow.

"You er don't feel like singing, do you, sir?" asked Pearson with some anxiety.

"As a matter of fact," said Denham, who had not previously considered this, "I do. You are full of excellent ideas, Pearson. But let us sing nothing improper, Pearson. Let it be something of noble sentiment, like——"

"Honestly, sir," urged Pearson, "if it was me, I wouldn't do it. *He's* upstairs, you know. We thought he was going to Manchester this afternoon, to stay a week, but he changed his mind. He's upstairs now."

This terrible hint referred to the autocrat of Medici Court, Cellini Court, Bourbon Court, and half a dozen other great hives. Sir Rufus Armingdale, high khan of builders, not only filled London with furnished flats which really were the last word in luxury at a low price; he showed his pride in his own merchandise by living in them.

"No special quarters for me," he was quoted as saying, with fist upraised for emphasis. "No castle in Surrey or barracks in Park Lane. Just an ordinary flat; and not the most expensive of 'em either. That's where I'm most comfortable, and that's where you'll find me."

Considering all the good things provided in Armingdale's Furnished Flats, even his autocratic laws were not much resented. Nor could anyone resent the fact that all

the flats in a given building were furnished exactly alike, and that the furniture must be kept in the position Rufus Armingdale gave it. Medici Court was 'Renaissance,' as Bourbon Court was 'Louis XV': a tower of rooms like luxurious cells, and only to be distinguished from each other by an ornament on a table or a picture on a wall.

But Sir Rufus's leases even discouraged pictures. Considering that he was something of an art-collector himself, and had often been photographed in his own flat with his favourite Greuze or Corot, some annoyance was felt at this. Sir Rufus Armingdale did not care. You either leased one of his flats or you didn't. He was that sort of man.

Otherwise, of course, Ronald Denham's adventure could not have happened. He returned from the bachelor party; he took Pearson's advice about the singing; he went up in the automatic lift to the second floor; and he walked into what the champagne told him was his own flat.

That he went to the second floor is certain. Pearson saw him put his finger on the proper button in the lift. But nothing else is certain, since the hall upstairs was dark. Pushing open a door—either his key fitted it or the door was open—Denham congratulated himself on getting home.

Also, he was a little giddy. He found himself in the small foyer, where lights were on. After a short interval he must have moved into the sitting-room, for he found himself sitting back in an armchair and contemplating familiar surroundings through a haze. Lights were turned on here as well: yellow-shaded lamps, one with a pattern like a dragon on the shade.

Something began to trouble him. There was something odd, he thought, about those lamp-shades. After some study, it occurred to him that he and Tom Evans hadn't any lamp-shades like that. They did not own any bronze book-ends either. As for the curtains . . .

Then a picture on the wall swam out of oblivion, and he stared at it. It was a small dull-coloured picture over the sideboard. And it penetrated into his mind at last that he had got into the wrong flat.

Everything now showed itself to him as wrong: it was as though a blur had come into focus.

"Here, I'm sorry!" he said aloud, and got up.

There was no reply. The heinousness of his offence partly steadied him. Where in the name of sanity was he? There were only three other flats on the second floor. One of these was Anita Bruce's. Of the others, one was occupied by a brisk young newspaper man named Conyers, and the other by the formidable Sir Rufus Armingdale.

Complete panic caught him. He felt that at any moment a wrathful occupant might descend on him, to call him a thief at worst or a snooper at best. Turning round to scramble for the door, he almost ran into another visitor in the wrong flat.

This visitor sat quietly in a tall chair near the door. He was a thin, oldish, well-dressed man, wearing thick-lensed spectacles, and his head was bent forward as though in meditation. He wore a soft hat and a thin oilskin waterproof coloured green: a jaunty and bilious-looking coat for such a quiet figure. The quiet light made it gleam.

"Please excuse——" Denham began in a rush, and

talked for some seconds before he realized that the man had not moved.

Denham stretched out his hand. The coat was one of those smooth, almost seamless American waterproofs, yellowish outside and green inside; and for some reason the man was now wearing it inside out. Denham was in the act of telling him this when the head lolled, the smooth oilskin gleamed again, and he saw that the man was dead.

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Tom Evans, stepping out of the lift at a quarter past one, found the hall of the second floor in complete darkness. When he had turned on the lights from a switch beside the lift, he stopped short and swore.

Evans, lean and swarthy, with darkish eyebrows merging into a single line across his forehead, looked a little like a Norman baron in a romance. Some might have said a robber baron, for he carried a brief-case and was a stern man of business despite his youth. But what he saw now made him momentarily forget his evening's work. The hall showed four doors, with their microscopic black numbers, set some distance apart. Near the door leading to Anita Bruce's flat, Ronald Denham sat hunched on an oak settle. There was a lump at the base of his skull and he was breathing in a way Evans did not like.

It was five minutes more before Denham had been whacked and pounded into semi-consciousness; and to such a blinding headache that its pain helped to revive him. First he became aware of Tom's lean, hook-nosed face bending over him, and Tom's usual fluency at preaching.

"I don't mind you getting drunk," the voice came to him dimly. "In fact, I expected it. But at least you ought to be able to carry your liquor decently. What the devil have you been up to, anyway? Hoy!"

"He had his raincoat on inside out," was the first thing Denham said. Then memory came back to him like a new headache or a new explosion, and he began to pour out the story.

"——and I tell you there's a dead man in one of those flats! I think he's been murdered. Tom, I'm not drunk; I swear I'm not. Somebody sneaked up behind and bashed me over the back of the head just after I found him."

"Then how did you get out here?"

"Oh, God, how should I know? Don't argue; help me up. I suppose I must have been dragged out here. If you don't believe me, feel the back of my head. Just feel it."

Evans hesitated. He was always practical, and there could be no denying the bruise. He looked uncertainly up and down the hall.

"But who is this dead man?" he demanded. "And whose flat is he in?"

"I don't know. It was an oldish man with thick glasses and a green raincoat. I never saw him before. Looked a bit like an American, somehow."

"Nonsense! Nobody wears a green raincoat."

"I'm telling you, he was wearing it inside out. If you ask me why, I'm going to bat my head against the wall and go to sleep again." He wished he could do this, for he could not see straight and his head felt like a printing-press in full blast. "We ought to be able to identify the flat easily enough. I can give a complete description of it——"

He paused, for two doors had opened simultaneously in the hall. Anita Bruce and Sir Rufus Armingdale came out, in different stages of anger or curiosity at the noise.

If Evans had been more of a psychologist, he might have anticipated the effect this would have on them. As it was, he stood looking from one to the other, thinking whatever thoughts you care to attribute to him. For he was an employee of Sir Rufus, as manager of the Sloane Square office of Armingdale Flats, and he could risk no trouble.

Anita seemed to take in the situation at a glance. She was small, dark, plump, and fluffy-haired. She was wearing a *négligé* and smoking a cigarette. Seeing the expressions of the other three, she removed the cigarette from her mouth in order to smile. Sir Rufus Armingdale did not look so much formidable as fretful. He had one of those powerful faces whose features seem to have run together like a bull-pup's. But the old dressing-gown, fastened up at the throat as though he were cold, took away the suggestion of an autocrat and made him only a householder.

He breathed through his nose, rather helplessly, until he saw an employee. His confidence returned.

"Good morning, Evans," he said. "What's the meaning of this?"

Evans risked it. "I'm afraid it's trouble, sir. Mr. Denham—well, he's found a dead man in one of the flats."

"Ron!" cried Anita.

"A dead man," repeated Armingdale, without surprise. "Where?"

"In one of the flats. He doesn't know which."

"Oh? Why doesn't he know which?"

"He's got a frightful bump on the back of his head," said Anita, exploring. She looked back over her shoulder and spoke swiftly. "It's quite all right, Tom. Don't get excited. He's d-r-u-n-k."

"I am not drunk," said Denham, with tense and sinister calmness. "May I also point out that I am able to read and write, and that I have not had words spelled out in front of me since I was four years old? Heaven give me s-t-r-e-n-g-t-h! I tell you, I can describe the place."

He did so. Afterwards there was a silence. Anita, her eyes shining curiously, dropped her cigarette on the autocrat's hardwood floor and ground it out. The autocrat seemed too abstracted to notice.

"Ron, old dear," Anita said, going over and sitting down beside him, "I'll believe you if you're as serious as all that. But you ought to know it isn't *my* flat."

"And I can tell you it isn't mine," grunted Armingdale. "There certainly isn't a dead man in it. I've just come from there, and I know."

If they had not known Armingdale's reputation so well, they might have suspected him of trying to make a joke. But his expression belied it as well. It was heavy and lowering, with more than a suggestion of the bull-pup.

"This picture you say you saw," he began. "The one over the sideboard. Could you describe it?"

"Yes, I think so," said Denham desperately. "It was a rather small portrait of a little girl looking sideways over some roses, or flowers of some kind. Done in that greyish-brown stuff; I think they call it sepia."

Armingdale stared at him.

"Then I know it isn't mine," he said. "I never owned a

sepia drawing in my life. If this young man is telling the truth, there's only one flat left. I think I shall just take the responsibility of knocking, and ——"

His worried gaze moved down towards the door of the flat occupied by Mr. Hubert Conyers, of the *Daily Record*. But it was unnecessary to knock at the door. It opened with such celerity that Denham wondered whether anyone had been looking at them through the slot of the letter-box; and Hubert Conyers stepped out briskly. He was an unobtrusive, sandy-haired little man, very different from Denham's idea of a journalist. His only extravagance was a taste for blended shadings in his clothes, from suit to shirt to necktie; though he usually contrived to look rumpled. He was always obliging, and as busy as a parlour clock. But his manner had a subdued persuasive-ness which could worm him through narrower places than you might have imagined.

He came forward drawing on his coat, and with a deft gesture he got into the middle of the group.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," he began, seeming to propitiate everyone at once. "I couldn't help overhearing, you know. Good evening, Sir Rufus. The fact is, it's not my flat either. Just now, the only ornaments in my sitting-room are a lot of well-filled ashtrays and a bottle of milk. Come and see, if you like."

There was a silence, while Conyers looked anxious.

"But it's got to be somebody's flat!" snapped Sir Rufus Armingdale, with a no-nonsense air. "Stands to reason. A whole confounded sitting-room can't vanish like smoke. Unless—stop a bit—unless Mr. Denham got off at some other floor?"

"I don't know. I may have."

"And I don't mind admitting —" said Armingdale, hesitating as everyone looked at him curiously. The autocrat seemed worried. "Very well. The fact is, *J'te* got a picture in my flat something like the one Mr. Denham described. It's Greuze's 'Young Girl with Primroses.' But mine's an oil-painting, of course. Mr. Denham is talking about a sepia drawing. That is, if he really saw anything. Does this dead man exist at all?"

Denham's protestations were cut short by the hum of an ascending lift. But it was not the ordinary lift in front of them; it was the service-lift at the end of the hall. The door was opened, and the cage-grating pulled back, to show the frightened face of the night porter.

"Sir," said Pearson, addressing Armingdale as though he were beginning an oration. "I'm glad to see *you*, sir. You always tell us that if something serious happens we're to come straight to you instead of the manager. Well, I'm afraid this is serious. I — the fact is, I found something in this lift."

Denham felt that they were being haunted by that phrase, 'the fact is.' Everybody seemed to use it. He recalled a play in which it was maintained that anyone who began a sentence like this was usually telling a lie. But he had not time to think about this, for they had found the elusive dead man.

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The unknown lay on his face in one corner of the lift. A light in the roof of the steel cage shone down on his grey felt hat, on an edge of his thick spectacles, and on his oil-skin waterproof. But the coat was no longer green, for he was now wearing it right-side-out in the ordinary way.

Anita, who had come quietly round beside Denham, seized his arm. The night porter restrained Tom Evans as the latter bent forward.

"I shouldn't touch him, sir, if I was you. There's blood."

"Where?"

Pearson indicated a stain on the grey-rubber floor. "And if I'm any judge, sir, he died of a stab through the heart. I—I lifted him up a bit. But I don't see any kind of knife that could have done it."

"Is this the man you saw?" Armingdale asked Denham quietly.

Denham nodded. Something tangible, something to weigh and handle, seemed to have brought the force back to Armingdale's personality.

"Except," Denham added, "that he's now wearing his raincoat right-side out. Why? Will somebody tell me that? Why?"

"Never mind the raincoat," Anita said close to his ear. "Ron, you don't know him, do you? You'll swear you don't know him?"

He was startled. She had spoken without apparent urgency, and so low that the others might not have heard her. But Denham, who knew her so well, knew that there was urgency behind the unwinking seriousness of her eyes. Unconsciously she was shaking his arm. His wits had begun to clear, despite the pain in his skull; and he wondered.

"No, of course I don't know him. Why should I?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all. Ss-t!"

"Well, I know him," said Hubert Conyers.

Conyers had been squatting down at the edge of the

lift, and craning his neck to get a close view of the body without touching it. Now he straightened up. He seemed so excited that he could barely control himself, and his mild eye looked wicked.

"I interviewed him a couple of days ago," said Conyers. "Surely you know him, Sir Rufus?"

"'Surely' is a large word, young man. No, I do not know him. Why?"

"That's Dan Randolph; the American real-estate king," said Conyers, keeping a watchful eye on Armingdale. "All of you will have heard of him: he's the fellow who always deals in spot cash, even if it's a million. I'd know those spectacles anywhere. He's as near-sighted as an owl. Er—am I correctly informed, Sir Rufus, that he was in England to do some business with you?"

Armingdale smiled bleakly. "You have no information, young man," he said. "And so far as I'm concerned you're not getting any. So that's Dan Randolph! I knew he was in England; but he's certainly not made any business proposition to me."

"Maybe he was coming to do it."

"Maybe he was," said Armingdale, with the same air of a parent to a child. He turned to Pearson. "You say you found him in that lift. When did you find him? And how did you come to find him?"

Pearson was voluble. "The lift was on the ground floor, sir. I just happened to glance through the little glass panel, and I see him lying there. So I thought I'd better run the lift up here and get you. As for putting him there——" He pointed to the *recall* button on the wall outside the lift. "Somebody on any floor, sir, could have shoved him in here, and pressed this button, and sent him

downstairs. He certainly wasn't put in on the ground floor. Besides, I saw him come into the building to-night."

"Oh?" put in Conyers softly. "When was this?"

"Might have been eleven o'clock, sir."

"Who was he coming to see?"

Pearson shook his head helplessly and with a certain impatience. "These ain't service-flats, sir, where you telephone up about every visitor. You ought to know we're not to ask visitors anything unless they seem to need help, or unless it's somebody who has no business here. *I* don't know. He went up in the main lift, that's all I can tell you."

"Well, what floor did he go to?"

"I dunno." Pearson ran a finger under a tight collar. "But excuse me, sir, may I ask a question, if you please? What's wrong exactly?"

"We've lost a room," said Ronald Denham, with inspiration. "Maybe you can help. Look here, Pearson: you've been here in these flats a long time. You've been inside most of them—in the sitting-rooms, for instance?"

"I think I can say I've been in all of 'em, sir."

"Good. Then we're looking for a room decorated like this," said Denham. For the third time he described what he had seen, and Pearson's expression grew to one of acute anguish. At the end of it he shook his head.

"It's nobody's room, sir," the porter answered simply. "There's not a sitting-room like that in the whole building."

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At three o'clock in the morning, a sombre group of people sat in Sir Rufus Armingdale's flat, and did not

even look at each other. The police work was nearly done. A brisk divisional detective-inspector, accompanied by a sergeant, a photographer, and a large amiable man in a top-hat, had taken a statement from each of those concerned. But the statements revealed nothing.

Denham, in fact, had received only one more mental jolt. Entering Armingdale's flat, he thought for a second that he had found the missing room. The usual chairs of stamped Spanish leather, the refectory table, the carved gewgaws, greeted him like a familiar nightmare. And over the sideboard hung a familiar picture—that of a small girl looking sideways over an armful of roses.

"That's not it!" said Anita quickly.

"It's the same subject, but it's not the same picture. That's in oils. What sort of game do you suppose is going on in this place?"

Anita glanced over her shoulder. She had dressed before the arrival of the police; and also, he thought, she had put on more make-up than was necessary.

"Quick, Ron; before the others get here. Were you telling the truth?"

"Certainly. You don't think——?"

"Oh, I don't know and I don't care; I just want you to tell me. Ron, you didn't kill him yourself?"

He had not even time to answer before she stopped him. Sir Rufus Armingdale, Conyers, and Evans came through from the foyer; and with them was the large amiable man who had accompanied Divisional-Inspector Davidson. His name, it appeared, was Colonel March.

"You see," he explained, with a broad gesture, "I'm not here officially. I happened to be at the theatre, and I dropped in on Inspector Davidson for a talk, and he asked

me to come along. So if you don't like any of my questions, just tell me to shut my head. But I do happen to be attached to the Yard——"

"I know you, Colonel," said Conyers, with a crooked grin. "You're the head of the Ragbag Department, D-3. Some call it the Crazy House."

Colonel March nodded seriously. He wore a dark overcoat, and had a top-hat pushed back on his large head; this, with his florid complexion, sandy moustache, and bland blue eye, gave him something of the look of a stout colonel in a comic paper. He was smoking a large-bowled pipe with the effect of seeming to sniff smoke from the bowl rather than draw it through the stem. He appeared to be enjoying himself.

"It's a compliment," he assured them. "After all, somebody has got to sift all the queer complaints. If somebody comes in and reports (say) that the Borough of Stepney is being terrorized by a blue pig, I've got to decide whether it's a piece of lunacy, or a mistake, or a hoax, or a serious crime. Otherwise good men would only waste their time. You'd be surprised how many such complaints there are. But I was thinking, and so was Inspector Davidson, that you had a very similar situation here. If you wouldn't mind a few extra questions ——"

"As many as you like," said Sir Rufus Armingdale. "Provided somebody's got a hope of solving this damned ——"

"As a matter of fact," said Colonel March, frowning, "Inspector Davidson has reason to believe that it is already solved. A good man, Davidson."

There was a silence. Something unintentionally sinister seemed to have gathered in Colonel March's

affable tone. For a moment nobody dared to ask him what he meant.

"Already solved?" repeated Hubert Conyers.

"Suppose we begin with you, Sir Rufus," said March with great courtesy. "You have told the inspector that you did not know Daniel Randolph personally. But it seems to be common knowledge that he was in England to see you."

Armingdale hesitated. "I don't know his reasons. He may have been here to see me, among other things. Probably was. He wrote to me about it from America. But he hasn't approached me yet, and I didn't approach him first. It's bad business."

"What was the nature of this business, Sir Rufus?"

"He wanted to buy an option I held on some property in——never mind where. I'll tell you in private, if you insist."

"Was a large sum involved?"

Armingdale seemed to struggle with himself. "Four thousand, more or less."

"So it wasn't a major business deal. Were you going to sell?"

"Probably."

Colonel March's abstracted eye wandered to the picture over the sideboard. "Now, Sir Rufus, that Greuze, 'Young Girl with Primroses.' I think it was recently reproduced, in its natural size, as a full-page illustration in the *Metropolitan Illustrated News*?"

"Yes, it was," said Armingdale. He added: "In——sepia."

Something about this afterthought made them all move forward to look at him. It was like the puzzle of a half-truth: nobody knew what it meant

"Exactly. Just two more questions. I believe that each of these flats communicates with a fire-escape leading down into the mews behind?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Will the same key open the front door of each of the flats?"

"No, certainly not. All the lock-patterns are different."

"Thank you. Now, Mr. Conyers—a question for you. Are you married?"

Hitherto Conyers had been regarding him with a look of watchful expectancy, like an urchin about to smash a window and run. Now he scowled.

"Married? No."

"And you don't keep a valet?"

"The answer to that, Colonel, is loud and prolonged laughter. Honestly, I don't like your 'social' manner. Beston, our crime news man, knows you. And it's always, 'Blast you, Beston, if you print one hint about the Thing-gummy case I'll have your hide.' What difference does it make whether I'm married or not, or whether I have a valet or not?"

"A great deal," said March seriously. "Now, Miss Bruce. What is your occupation, Miss Bruce?"

"I'm an interior decorator," answered Anita. She began to laugh. It may have been with a tinge of hysteria; but she sat back in a tall chair and laughed until there were tears in her eyes.

"I'm terribly sorry," she went on, holding out her hand as though to stop them, "but don't you see? The murder was done by an interior decorator. That's the whole secret."

Colonel March cut short Armingdale's shocked protest.

"Go on," he said sharply.

"I thought of it first off. Of course there's no 'vanishing room.' Some sitting-room has just been redecorated. All the actual furnishings, tables and chairs and sideboards, are just the same in every room. The only way you can tell them apart is by small movable things pictures, lamp-shades, book-ends —which could be changed in a few minutes.

"Ron accidentally walked into the murderer's flat just after the murderer had killed that old man. That put the murderer in a pretty awful position. Unless he killed Ron too, he was caught with the body and Ron could identify his flat. But he thought of a better way. He sent that man's body down in the lift and dragged Ron out into the hall. Then he simply altered the decorations of his flat. Afterwards he could sit down and dare anyone to identify it as the place where the body had been."

Anita's face was flushed with either defiance or fear.

"Warm," said Colonel March. "Unquestionably warm. That is why I was wondering whether you couldn't tell us what really happened."

"I don't understand you."

"Well, there are objections to the redecoration. You've got to suppose that nobody had ever been in the flat before and seen the way it was originally decorated. You've also got to suppose that the murderer could find a new set of lamp-shades, pictures, and book-ends in the middle of the night — Haven't you got it the wrong way round?"

"The wrong way round?"

"Somebody," said March, dropping his courtesy,

"prepared a dummy room to begin with. He put in the new lamp-shades, the book-ends, the copy of a well-known picture, even a set of new curtains. He entertained Randolph there. Afterwards, of course, he simply removed the knick-knacks and set the place right again. But it was the dummy room into which Ronald Denham walked. That, Mr. Denham, was why you did not recognize —"

"Recognize what?" roared Denham. "Where was I?"

"In the sitting-room of your own flat," said Colonel March gravely. "If you had been sober you might have made a mistake; but you were so full of champagne that your instinct brought you home after all."

There were two doors in the room, and the blue uniform of a policeman appeared in each. At March's signal, Inspector Davidson stepped forward. He said:

"Thomas Evans, I arrest you for the murder of Daniel Randolph. I have to warn you that anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence at your trial."

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"Oh, look here," protested Colonel March, when they met in Armingdale's flat next day, "the thing was simple enough. We had twice as much trouble over that kid in Bayswater who pinched all the oranges. And you had all the facts.

"Evans, as one of Sir Rufus's most highly placed and trusted employees, was naturally in a position to know all about the projected business deal with Randolph. And so he planned an ingenious swindle. A swindle, I am certain, was all he intended.

"Now you, Sir Rufus, had intended to go to Manchester

yesterday afternoon, and remain there for a week. (Mr. Denham heard that from the night-porter, when he was advised against singing.) That would leave your flat empty. Evans telephoned to Randolph, posing as you. He asked Randolph to come round to your flat at eleven o'clock at night, and settle the deal. He added that you *might* be called away to Manchester; but, in that event, his secretary would have the necessary papers ready and signed.

"It would have been easy. Evans would get into your empty flat by way of the fire-escape and the window. He would pose as your secretary. Randolph—who, remember, always paid spot cash even if it involved a million—would hand over a packet of banknotes for a forged document.

"Why should Randolph be suspicious of anything? He knew, as half the newspaper-reading world knows, that Sir Rufus lived on the second floor of Medici Court. He had seen photographs of Sir Rufus with his favourite Greuze over the sideboard. Even if he asked the hall-porter for directions, he would be sent to the right flat. Even if the hall porter said Sir Rufus was in Manchester, the ground had been prepared and Randolph would ask for Sir Rufus's secretary.

"Unfortunately, a hitch occurred. Sir Rufus decided not to go to Manchester. He decided it yesterday afternoon, after all Evans's plans had been made and Randolph was due to arrive. But Evans needed that money; as we have discovered to-day, he needed it desperately. He wanted that four thousand pounds.

"So he hit on another plan. Sir Rufus would be at home and his flat could not be used. But, with all the rooms exactly alike except for decorations, why not an

imitation of Sir Rufus's flat? The same plan would hold good, except that Randolph would be taken to the wrong place. He would come up in the lift at eleven. Evans would be waiting with the door of the flat open, and would take him to a place superficially resembling Sir Rufus's. The numbers on the doors are very small; and Randolph, as we know, was so near-sighted as to be almost blind. If Evans adopted some disguise, however clumsy, he could never afterwards be identified as the man who swindled Randolph. And he ran no risk in using the flat he shared with Denham."

Anita interposed. "Of course!" she said. "Ron was at a bachelor party, and ordinarily it would have kept him there whooping until two or three o'clock in the morning. But he reformed, and came home early."

Denham groaned. "But I still can't believe it," he insisted. "Tom Evans? A murderer?"

"He intended no murder," said Colonel March. "But, you see, Randolph suspected something. Randolph showed that he suspected. And Evans, as a practical man, had to kill him. You can guess why Randolph suspected?"

"Well?"

"Because Evans is colour-blind," said Colonel March.

"It's too bad," Colonel March went on sadly, "but the crime was from the first the work of a colour-blind man. Now, none of the rest of you could qualify for that deficiency. As for Sir Rufus, I can think of nothing more improbable than a colour-blind art-collector unless it is a colour-blind interior decorator. Mr. Conyers here shows by the blended hues of brown or blue in his suits, shirts, and ties that he has a fine eye for colour effect; and he possesses no wife or valet to choose them for him.

"But Evans? He is not only partially but wholly colour-blind. You gave us a spirited account of it. Randolph's body was sent up in the lift by Pearson. When Evans stepped forward, Pearson warned him not to touch the body, saying that there was blood. Evans said: 'Where?' though he was staring straight down in a small, brightly lighted lift at a red bloodstain on a grey-rubber floor. Red on any surface except green or yellow is absolutely invisible to colour-blind men.

"That was also the reason why Randolph's waterproof was put on inside out. Randolph had removed his hat and coat when he first came into the flat. After Evans had stabbed him with a clasp-knife, Evans put the hat and coat back on the body previous to disposing of it. But he could not distinguish between the yellow outside and the green inside of that seamless oilskin.

"You, Mr. Denham, let yourself into the flat with your own key: which in itself told us the location of the 'vanished' room, for no two keys are alike. I also think that Miss Bruce could have told us all along where the 'vanished' room was. I am inclined to suspect she saw Randolph going into your flat, and was afraid you might be concerned in the murder."

"Oh, well," said Anita philosophically.

"Anyway, you spoke to a corpse about his coat being inside out; and Evans rectified the error before he put the body in the lift. He had to knock you out, of course. But he genuinely didn't want to hurt you. He left the building by way of the fire-escape into the mews. He disposed of his stage-properties, though he was foolish enough to keep the money and the clasp-knife on his person, where they were found when we searched him. When he came back

here, he used the main lift in the ordinary way as though he were returning from his office. And he was genuinely concerned when he found you still unconscious on the bench in the hall."

There was a silence, broken by Armingdale's snort.

"But colour-blindness! What's that got to do with the solution? How did you come to think the murderer must have been colour-blind to begin with?"

Colonel March turned to stare at him. Then he shook his head, with a slow and dismal smile.

"Don't you see it even yet?" he asked. "That was the starting-point. We suspected it for the same reason Randolph suspected an imposture. Poor old Randolph wasn't an art-critic. Any sort of coloured daub, in the ordinary way, he would have swallowed as the original 'Young Girl with Primroses' he expected to see. But Evans didn't allow for the one thing even a near-sighted man does know: colour. In his effort to imitate the decorations of Sir Rufus's flat, the fool hung up as an oil-painting nothing more than a sepia reproduction out of an illustrated weekly."

Hot Money

JUST before closing-time on a Tuesday afternoon in December, a saloon car drew up before the St. James's office of the City and Provincial Bank, and four men got out. Lights were burning inside the bank, but the day was raw and murky. Two of the newcomers went to the counter, where they accosted the cashiers with pistol-muzzles cradled over their arms. The third, who wore no hat or coat, walked behind the counter; and, before anybody knew what he was doing, began quietly drawing the blinds on the windows.

The fourth, who had taken a forty-five calibre revolver out of his overcoat pocket, spoke with great clearness.

"You know why we're here," he said. "Just keep quiet and nothing will happen to you."

One of the clerks, a youngster, laughed; and was instantly shot through the chest with a silenced gun.

The noise it made was no louder than that of slapping two cupped palms together, a kind of *thock*. The clerk tumbled sideways, rattling against a scales, and they heard his body strike the floor. Then all noise seemed to die away under the bright, hard lights, except the sound of the newcomers' footsteps on the marble floor.

"That's right," said the man who had first spoken. "Just keep quiet and nothing will happen to you."

The thing was incredible; but it was happening. Possibly every man in the bank, now staring in various

twisted positions with hands in the air, had seen it happen in a film, and had smiled at it as being confined to another continent. But with great precision the man who had drawn the blinds was now clearing out the safe, transferring what he wanted to a neat leather bag. Outside bustled the traffic of St. James's; passers-by saw a closed bank, and thought nothing of it. By the third minute it had become unbearable. The manager, risking it, ducked under the counter for a gun, and was shot down. Then the leader of the gang leaned close to a young clerk named John Parrish, and said:

"Thanks, kid. You'll get your cut."

Like four well-trained ghosts, the raiders came together and melted out into the street. Their car was away from the kerb before the alarm sounded.

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Now the robbery of the City and Provincial Bank failed because of one small but important fact. In England you can rob quite easily; you can even, if you do not mind risking the gallows, rob with violence; but you cannot make a getaway afterwards. 'Skipper' Morgan, late of Cicero, Illinois, might be excused for not realizing this. But Pudge Henderson, Slugger Dean, and Bill Stein, all of whom knew Dartmoor as the rest of us know our own homes, should have realized it. Possibly they expected the very daring of the raid to bring it off for them, and they changed cars three times before, early that evening, two Flying Squad cars cut them off on the road to Southampton.

Skipper Morgan wanted to shoot it out, and was brought down in a flying tackle which broke his arm.

But here the police met a snag: of twenty-three thousand pounds in cash and bonds, not one penny was found on the fugitives.

Chief Inspector Ames visited Skipper Morgan that night.

"You're in bad, Skipper," he said pleasantly. "One of those fellows you shot is likely to die. Even if he pulls through, you can reckon on a good long stretch."

The other said nothing, though he looked murderous. It was Ames who had broken his arm.

"I don't say it'd help you," pursued the chief inspector, "if you told us what you did with that money. But it might, Skipper. It *might*. And you might tell us whether that young clerk at the bank, the one you said would get his cut, was in it with you."

"Dirty little rat," said the Skipper, out of pure spite and malice. "Sure he was in it. But I want to see my lawyer; that's what I want."

So they detained John Parrish. To Marjorie Dawson he wrote: "Don't you believe a word of it. Cheer up."

A solicitor for Morgan was speedily produced. This was none other than Mr. Ireton Boulder, that aloof gentleman with the aristocratic nose and the wide clientèle. Scotland Yard regarded him with disfavour, because he never failed to put their backs up. True, there was little that even Mr. Ireton Boulder could do for the prisoners; but he contrived to suggest, with a fishy smile and a sad shake of the head, that they would leave the court without a stain on their characters. Still the stolen money was not forthcoming.

"It's one of two things, sir," Chief Inspector Ames told the Assistant Commissioner. "They've hidden it, or they've turned it over to a fence."

"A fence for stolen money?"

"And bonds," said Ames. "Nothing easier. Of course we've got the numbers of the notes, fivers and above. But they can easily be disposed of abroad: people are buying and hoarding English money, and they don't necessarily inquire where it comes from. I know of two fences like that, and I hear there's a third operating who's the biggest in the business. Getting rid of 'hot' money used to be difficult; but it's simple now. It's more than a new kind of racket; it's a new kind of big business. The state of Europe being what it is, thousands of people are trying to get out of there and into England without their authorities knowing they've got any money at all. Hoarding English money is the best way to do it. If we could get a line on who's doing this——"

"Any suspicions?"

"Yes, sir," answered Ames promptly. "Ireton Boulder."

The Assistant Commissioner whistled. "If it only could be!" he said, with dreamy relish. "Lord, if it only could be! But be careful, Ames; he's got a lot of influence. And what makes you think it's Boulder, anyway?"

"It's all underground so far," Ames admitted. "But that's what the boys say. Now, we nabbed Morgan and his mob just outside a village called Crawleigh. Boulder's got a country house only a mile from there. Boulder was at his country house on Tuesday night, though as a rule he only goes down at week-ends. Skipper Morgan was down there twice in the week before the robbery. It doesn't prove anything. But taken with the rest of the rumours——"

"What about the boy Parrish?"

Ames grinned. "Had nothing to do with it, sir. It was Morgan's temper, that's all, or Morgan's idea of a joke.

I'm convinced of it, and so is the bank. But Parrish might be useful."

Just how useful Chief Inspector Ames did not realize until the following day, when Miss Marjorie Dawson came hurrying up to town.

She was a quiet, fair-haired girl, pretty yet unobtrusive, though now strung up to fighting pitch. Her hazel eyes had a directness of gaze which was as good as a handclasp; she had, even in this difficulty, a sense of humour. She told the chief inspector things which made him swear. But, after a half-hour interview, it was not to the Assistant Commissioner that Ames took her. He took her to a door on the ground floor labelled *D3: Colonel March*.

"Colonel March," he said, "let me introduce Miss Marjorie Dawson. Miss Dawson is engaged to be married to young Parrish. She's now employed as secretary to Ireton Bowlder's aunt——"

"Not any longer," said the girl, smiling faintly. "Sacked yesterday."

"And she says Bowlder's got the City and Provincial Bank money."

Colonel March was a large, amiable man, with a speckled face, a bland eye, and a large-bowled pipe projecting from under a cropped moustache. He rocked on his heels before the fire, and seemed puzzled.

"I am delighted to hear it," he said formally. "But why come to me? This, Miss Dawson, is the Queer Complaints Department. Business has been bad lately; and I should be very glad to tackle the problem of a blue pig or a ghost in the garden. But, if you've landed Ireton, why come to me?"

"Because it's a queer complaint, right enough," said

Ames grimly. "What Miss Dawson tells us is impossible."

"Impossible?"

Marjorie Dawson looked from one to the other of them, and drew a deep breath of relief. Colour had come back into her face.

"I hope you're being frank with me," she said. She appealed to Colonel March. "Inspector Ames tells me that you haven't really got a case against John Parrish, and don't mean to hold him——"

"No, no; you can have him whenever you want him," said Ames with impatience.

"——but I came up here after somebody's blood," the girl admitted. "You see, the local police wouldn't believe me; and yet it's true, every word of it."

"The money vanished in front of their eyes," said Ames.

"One moment," said Colonel March, with an air of refreshed interest. He pushed out chairs for them. "Disappearing money. That is better; that is distinctly better. Tell me about it."

"It was at Greenacres," said the girl, so eager to tell the story that they had to guide her to the chair. "Greenacres is Mr. Bowlder's country house. As Mr. Ames told you, I'm Miss Bowlder's secretary; she keeps house for her nephew.

"I'm not going to tell you what I felt when I heard about the robbery. The first I knew of it was when I opened the newspaper at the breakfast-table on Wednesday, and saw John's name staring up at me—as though he'd committed a murder or something. I couldn't believe it. I knew it was a mistake of some kind. But I thought Mr. Bowlder might know——"

"Might know?" prompted Colonel March.

She hesitated, her forehead puckered. "Well, not that, exactly. I thought he might be able to help me, being a solicitor. Or at least that he would know what to do.

"It was barely half-past eight in the morning. I was the only one up in the house, except servants; Miss Bowlder doesn't get down until nine. Then I remembered that Mr. Bowlder had come down to Greenacres the afternoon before, and I could go to him straight away.

"That's how it happened. You see, when Mr. Bowlder is at Greenacres he always has nine-o'clock breakfast with his aunt: very dutiful and all that. Any letters that come for him in the morning are always put in his study—which is at the back of the house. Before he goes in to breakfast, he always goes to the study to see if there are any letters. So back I went to the study, to catch him alone before he went to breakfast. I didn't knock; I just opened the door and walked in. And I got such a shock that I thought I must be seeing things.

"The study is a large, rather bare room, with two windows looking out over a terrace. It has recently been painted, by the way, which is rather important. It was a bright, cold, quiet morning; and the sun was pouring in. There is a bust of somebody or other on the mantelpiece, and a big flat-topped desk in the centre of the room. Of course, I hadn't expected to find anybody there. But Mr. Bowlder was sitting at the table, fully dressed. And spread out in rows on the table were at least twenty packets of banknotes of all denominations. Nearly every packet was fastened with a little paper band with *City and Provincial Bank* printed on it.

"I simply stood and stared. My head was full of the

City and Provincial Bank. And, anyway, it's not his own bank.

"Then Mr. Bowlder turned round and saw me. The sun was behind his head and I didn't get a good view of his face; but all of a sudden his fingers crisped up as though he were going to scratch with them. Then he got up and ran at me. I jumped outside; he slammed the door, and bolted it on the inside."

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She paused.

"Go on, Miss Dawson," said Colonel March in a curious voice.

"It takes a long time to tell," she went on rather blankly, "but in a second or two I put together a whole lot of things. Skipper Morgan's gang had been arrested just outside our village; the paper said so. Morgan's picture was in the paper, and I knew I had seen him at Greenacres the week before. John had been down there to visit me, too. I suppose Morgan saw him there, and that's why Morgan made such very funny jokes about John when the bank was robbed. It was all a kind of whirl in my head; but it came together as a dead certainty.

"There is a telephone in the hall just outside Mr. Bowlder's study. I sat down and rang up the local police."

Here she looked at them with some defiance.

"What I was afraid of was that Mr. Bowlder would come out of the room and take the money away and hide it somewhere before the police arrived. I didn't see how I could stop him if he did. But he didn't even come out of the study. That worried me horribly, because the room was as quiet as a grave and I wondered what

he might be up to. I like people to *do* something.

"Then I thought: 'Suppose he got out of a window?' But I remembered something about that. As I told you, the woodwork of that room had been painted only a few days before. It wasn't the best of painting jobs; and as a result both windows were so stuck that it was impossible to open them. Annie had been complaining about it the day before; they were to have been seen to that very day. So, when the police arrived I could hardly believe my good luck. Mr. Bowlder was still in that room with the money.

"It was an inspector and a sergeant of the local police. They were on hot bricks, because Mr. Bowlder is an important man; but the Morgan gang had been caught near there and they weren't taking any chances. While I was trying to explain, Mr. Bowlder opened the door of the study. He was as pleasant and sad-faced as ever.

"He said: 'Money? What money?'

"I explained all over again, and I'm afraid I got a bit incoherent about it. But I told them the money was still in the study, because Mr. Bowlder hadn't left it.

"He said—and don't I remember it!—'Gentlemen, this young lady is suffering from optical illusions. At nine o'clock in the morning this is a pity. I am aware that you have no search-warrant, Inspector, but you are at liberty to make as thorough a search of this room as you like. How much money was there, Miss Dawson?'

"I said thousands and thousands of pounds: it sounded wrong even as I said it. Mr. Bowlder laughed.

"He said: 'Thousands and thousands of pounds, eh? Gentlemen, if you can find any money in this room—apart from a few shillings on my person—I will donate

it all to police charities. But there is no money here.'
• "And there wasn't. Enough money to fill a suitcase; and yet it wasn't there."

Colonel March frowned. "You mean the police didn't find it?"

"I mean it wasn't there to be found. It had just vanished."

"That's as true as gospel," declared Chief Inspector Ames with vehemence. "I rang them up half an hour ago and talked to Inspector Daniels. Search? They had the whole place to pieces! Bowlder sat and smoked cigarettes and egged them on. They even got an architect in to make certain there were no secret cavities anywhere in the room."

"And?"

"There weren't any. There wasn't a hiding-place for so much as a pound note, let alone a sackful of the stuff. The point is, what's to be done? I don't think Miss Dawson is lying; but all that money couldn't vanish into thin air. How could it?"

Colonel March was pleased. He relighted his pipe; he rocked on his heels before the fire; then, becoming conscious of the impropriety, he coughed and tried to conceal the fact that he was pleased.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "But this is the best thing I have encountered since the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin (you recall?) went after the purloined letter. Ahem. Now let us see. We establish that there are no secret panels, cavities, or other flummery. Windows?"

"Just as Miss Dawson said. The windows were so stuck that two men couldn't move 'em. Nothing could have been taken out of the room like that."

"Fireplace?"

"Bricked up. They don't use it, because the room is centrally heated. Bricks solidly cemented and untouched. No possible hiding-place in or round the fireplace."

"Furniture?"

Ames consulted his notebook. "One flat-topped table, one small table, two easy-chairs, one straight chair, one bookcase, one lamp-standard, one standing ash-tray. You can take it for granted that not one of those got away without the closest examination; and nothing was hidden in any of them. Anything to add to that, Miss Dawson?"

Marjorie shook her head.

"No. And it wasn't in the carpet or the curtains, or behind the pictures, or in the leaves of the books, or even in the bust I mentioned; not that you could put all that money there, anyway. It just wasn't there." She clenched her hands. "But you do believe me, don't you?"

"Miss Dawson," said Ames slowly, "I don't know. You're certain Bowlder didn't leave the study at any time before the police arrived?"

"Positive."

"He couldn't have slipped out?"

"No. I was in front of the door all the time. It's true, Inspector. What reason would I have for lying to you? It's only got me the sack, and it hasn't helped John. I've thought and thought about it. I thought of the trick, too, of hiding a thing by leaving it in plain sight, where nobody notices it. But you certainly couldn't leave the City and Provincial Bank money in plain sight without anybody noticing it."

"Well, it beats me," admitted the chief inspector. "But then that's why we're here. It's impossible! Daniels

swears there wasn't an inch of that room they didn't go over with a fine-tooth comb. And yet I believe you, because I've got a feeling Bowlder has been too smart for us somehow. Any ideas, Colonel?"

Colonel March sniffed at his pipe.

"I was just wondering," he muttered; and then a doubtful grin broke over his face. "I am still wondering. Look here, Miss Dawson; you are sure there was *no* article of furniture in that room you haven't described to us?"

"If you mean things like ashtrays or desk-ornaments—"

"No, no; I mean quite a large article of furniture."

"I'm certain there wasn't. There couldn't very well be a large article of furniture that nobody would see."

"I wonder," said Colonel March. "Is Mr. Bowlder still at Greenacres? Excellent! I very much want to speak to him; and I want to see his study."

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Under a sky heavy with threatening snow, the police car left Scotland Yard early in the afternoon. It contained Chief Inspector Ames and the plain-clothes man who was driving in the front seat, with Marjorie Dawson and Colonel March in the rear seat. To the girl's protests that she wished to remain in London with Parrish, Colonel March was deaf; he said there was time enough. At four o'clock they drove into the grounds of an ugly but highly substantial and highly respectable country house in Victorian Gothic.

Colonel March stood up as the car stopped in the drive.

"Where," he asked, "are the windows of the study?"

"At the back," said Marjorie. "You take the path round to the left——"

"Let's take it," said Colonel March.

Dusk was coming on, but no lights showed at Greenacres. They circled the house under the blast of an east wind, Colonel March stumping ahead with his coat-collar turned up and an old tweed cap pulled low on his forehead. Climbing some flagged steps to a terrace, they looked into the nearer of the study windows; and came face to face with Mr. Ireton Boulder looking out at them.

One of Boulder's hands flattened out against the glass with white fingers. The other hand, which was wrapped in a handkerchief, he thrust into his pocket. In the twilight he looked nervous and a trifle greenish of countenance.

"Good afternoon," said Colonel March politely. The wind whipped the words away; and Boulder inside the glass was as silent as a fish in an aquarium, though his lips moved. Then Boulder raised the window.

"I said good afternoon," repeated Colonel March. Before Boulder could move back he had reached out and shaken hands with him through the window. "You know most of us, I think."

"Yes," said Boulder, looking at Marjorie. "What do you want?"

Colonel March leaned against the ledge of the window.

"I thought you would like to know," he said, "that the manager of the City and Provincial Bank was a little better this morning. That will probably make the charge against five persons something a little less than murder."

"Indeed. The fifth is young Parrish, I suppose?"

"No," said Colonel March. "The fifth is probably yourself."

Again wind whipped round the corner of the house,

ruffling Bowlder's neat hair. But Bowlder himself was not ruffled. He regarded them with a pale and sceptical smile; then he began to close the window.

"Better not," the colonel advised. "We're coming in."

"You have a warrant?"

"Oh, yes. That window is now in working order, I see. Robinson," he looked at the plain-clothes man, "will climb through and stay with you while we go round by the front door."

By the time they reached the study, Bowlder had turned on a standard-lamp by the table, upon which it threw a bright light, though most of the room was left in shadow. The room was exactly as Marjorie Dawson had described.

"Now, then," said Bowlder quietly, "will you explain what you mean by this nonsense about a charge?"

"If," said Colonel March, "the City and Provincial money is found here, you're likely to be charged with Skipper Morgan. That is what I meant."

"Gentlemen—and Miss Dawson—listen to me. How many times have I got to submit to this? You don't really mean you want to make still another search?"

"Yes."

"Look round you," said Bowlder. "Take a long, careful look. Can you think of any place that could have been overlooked the first time?"

Chief Inspector Ames had to admit to himself that he couldn't. But Colonel March, instead of searching for a secret in the room, lowered himself into an easy-chair by the table. Removing his cap and turning down the collar of his coat, he faced them with a kind of sleepy affability.

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"In order to show you what I mean," he went on, "I must point out one of the curiously blind spots in the human mind. Has it ever occurred to you, Ames, that there's one piece of furniture in a room that nobody ever notices?"

"No, sir, it hasn't," said Ames. "You mean it's hidden?"

"On the contrary, I mean that it may be right there in front of everyone's eyes. But few people will ever see it."

"Are you trying to tell me," asked the chief inspector, "that there's such a thing as an invisible piece of furniture?"

"A mentally invisible piece of furniture," returned Colonel March. "Would you like proof of it? You have one, my boy, in the sitting-room of your own flat. I imagine there's one in the bedroom as well. It is under your eyes all the time. But suppose I said to you: 'Give me a list of every piece of furniture in your flat.' You would then give a list of things down to the smallest lampshade or ashtray; but I am willing to bet you would omit this whacking great object——"

Chief Inspector Ames looked round rather wildly. But his eye fell on Mr. Ireton Bowlder, and he checked himself. Bowlder, who had been lighting a cigarette, dropped the match on the floor. Under the bright light of the lamp his forehead shone with sweat; and he was not smiling.

Ames stared at him.

"Whether or not I understand you," he said, "by Jupiter, that fellow does!"

"Yes. I thought he would," agreed Colonel March, and got to his feet. "That's where he has hidden the money, you see."

"Oh, what on earth are you talking about?" cried Marjorie Dawson. She could keep herself in hand no longer, and she almost screamed. "What could be invisible? What is there we can't see? What part of the room is it in? What's the size of it? What's the colour of it, even?"

"As for size," replied the Colonel, "it may vary a good deal, but in this case it is about three feet high, two and a half feet long, and three or four inches deep. In colour it is sometimes painted a bright gilt; but in this case the object is painted a modest brown."

"*What?*"

"I mean," said Colonel March, "a steam-radiator. Particularly a dummy radiator like that one in the corner over there."

Ireton Boulder made a run for the door, but he was tripped and brought down by P.C. Robinson. They were compelled to use hand-cuffs when they took him away.

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"The possibilities of a dummy radiator, used for concealing something inside," said Colonel March, when they were on their way home, "deserve the attention of our best crooks. It is very nearly a perfect hiding-place. It is compact. It will hold a great deal of swag. And it is the one thing we never seem to notice, even if we happen to be looking at it.

"Nobody, you see, regards it as a piece of furniture at all; certainly not as a piece of furniture in which anything could possibly be concealed. Inspector Daniels never looked twice at the radiator in Boulder's study, and it is difficult to blame him. The radiator gave out heat, like an

honest radiator; it was of iron; it seemed solid; it was clamped to the floor.

"You can buy one of them easily enough. They are really disguised oil-stoves; portable, with several concealed burners, one under each coil. I have never forgotten the shock I received, sitting comfortably by a steaming radiator in the house of a friend of mine, when it suddenly occurred to me that the house was not centrally heated. Boulder's radiator, as you saw, was a more elaborate affair, but one that could be constructed without difficulty. Two of the coils contained no burners, were invisibly hinged at the back, and formed a hollow receptacle as large as he could wish. The house was centrally heated, so that a mere radiator aroused no suspicion whatever. It was, in short, a private safe without lock or combination, but so commonplace as to defy suspicion. I have been waiting for somebody to try the trick; and lo, somebody did."

Marjorie Dawson looked at him inquiringly.

"You mean you expected to find one of those things when we went down to Greenacres?" she asked.

"I am the Department of Queer Complaints," said Colonel March with apology, "and I was on the look-out for it as soon as central heating was reported in that room. I wasn't sure, of course, until we talked to Boulder through the study window. The banknotes would get rather warm, you can understand, from being in a compartment next to the oil burner. They wouldn't scorch, any more than our clothes scorch when we put them to dry on top of an ordinary radiator, but they would be tolerably warm; and so would the fastenings when Boulder opened his safe. That was why he had to

wrap a handkerchief round his right hand. And it was Chief Inspector Ames, with unerring intuition, who hit on the real clue long before it ever came to me."

"I did?" demanded Ames.

"Yes," said Colonel March. "You told me, with an accuracy beyond your wildest knowledge, that the money was hot."

Death in the Dressing-Room

THE lights were dimming when Jim Matthews entered the Orient Club. The hot, smoky room swallowed him up as though he were padded into layers of cotton-wool. Following the head waiter, he groped among the tables in a darkness faintly lightened by the white of table-covers, of shirt-fronts, of women's shoulders.

Then the drums began.

They drowned the stir and mutter which never deserts a night club, as though the echo of all the voices in the world were imprisoned there. The drums began with a kind of tom-tom beat, growing deeper and more rapid. A blue spot-light appeared from the other side of the room. It touched the polished dance-floor, it touched the edge of the orchestra from which the drums were now thundering. It allowed Jim Matthews to see that the head waiter was bowing him to a table. True enough, the table was in a very good position on the edge of the dance-floor. But it was occupied.

A girl in a white fur wrap looked round, startled, as they appeared. She was sitting alone at a table for two. The blue spot-light allowed Jim to make out only that she had brown hair and wide-spaced eyes and that by her clothes she was clearly not one of the girls of the house. On the table stood an unopened bottle of champagne, with a placard reading "Reserved."

Not a word was audible under the noise of the drums. To the girl Jim Matthews tried to convey apology; to the head waiter he indicated the 'reserved' placard. That dignitary lifted his shoulders in a broad and hideous shrug, and in pantomime indicated that all the other tables were full. Jim, though he hated making himself conspicuous, argued back in pantomime. The head waiter leaned close.

"Miss Rapport—she *dance*," he hissed:

He stabbed his finger urgently towards a curtained doorway, through which the star of the show was due to appear. He almost pushed Jim down into the chair, and then he disappeared.

What exasperated Jim Matthews was that the head waiter had paid absolutely no attention to what the girl at the table might think about it. He had not even looked at her. The matter wasn't of any importance, maybe; but Jim was already beginning to dislike the manners of the Orient Club. He glanced across at the girl in the white fur wrap.

"Sorry," he shouted.

He thought that she smiled and shook her head. Then they both looked back at the floor again, for Francine Rapport was beginning her Javanese temple dance.

Jingling faintly, a figure in a high, weird head-dress moved into the blue spotlight. 'Francine Rapport,' though born in Holland and brought up in New York, was purely Oriental in her good looks. Her face was almost unrecognizable in a mask of paint, with lines drawn upwards from the outer corners of the eyes and accentuating them, a stolid mask. She was small, her skin amber in colour; the body well-rounded, but of a muscled litheness.

Her costume, of large metal ornaments, glimmered under a light coating of oil. Her hands moved up that costume, grew taut above her head, descended with the palms outspread, and the dance began.

Jim Matthews reminded himself that he was not here to watch Francine Rapport. Yet he probably knew more about her than most of the patrons did. She must be into her forties, after a knockabout career with Tony Caplin; but she did not look it. Jim wondered where Caplin was to-night. He half got up from his chair — and saw Caplin, proprietor of the Orient Club, standing by the orchestra platform on the edge of the spotlight.

This was the moment when the girl in the white fur wrap slipped away from the table.

Well, it was no business of his. He watched her moving away into the darkness between the tables, in the direction of the orchestra platform. He sat down again. The tom-tom beat of the drums had quickened; the string music crept more insistently; and it came to Jim Matthews, as clearly as though he had heard an alarm bell, that something was going to happen.

Francine Rapport was afraid. He had no idea of what she was afraid, though anything was possible at the Orient Club. But it showed even in the rhythm of the dance, in the turn of her fingers or eyes, as though the fine body were really that of a priestess threatened by the temple god. So perhaps it was as well that she finished the dance a second too soon; and, a second too soon, the lights of the Orient Club flashed on.

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They showed Jim Matthews that the girl in the white

fur wrap was on her way back to his table. She had been moving quietly. But she started a little, caught out by the lights only a few feet away. She was just opening her handbag to slip something inside. She slipped it inside, and the handbag closed with a click, but not before Jim had seen what it was. It was a man's leather pocket-wallet.

Under the roar of applause that went up for Francine Rapport, Jim looked into the other girl's eyes. She was stooping slightly forward, as though to hide both the wallet and her own handbag. Her face was flushed dull red. On the dance-floor, Francine Rapport was bowing to the applause; then Francine turned and ran for the curtained doorway to the dressing-room. Chairs were pushed back. The orchestra, with a preliminary throat-clearing from the saxophone, burst into a lively dance number. And the girl in the white fur wrap, imitating the movement or thrown into a panic by it, lost her head and ran. With a muttered exclamation Jim Matthews got to his feet and followed her. After all, it was what he was there for, wasn't it?

Couples were taking the floor, looking unreal in the thick, smoky haze. They poured out to such an extent that Jim was caught as though in a football rush. From a microphone issued Tony Caplin's rich, hollow voice. "The boys are playing for you——" Jim dodged through, keeping his eye on the white fur wrap. It disappeared through the curtained doorway to the dressing-rooms. He reached the doorway only thirty seconds later; but the girl had gone.

Beyond was a passage in which he saw several doors, all closed. It was badly lighted, dingy, and full of the scent of

stale powder. He met nobody. The whole house seemed to shake to a measured stamping over the music; but it might have come from another street. Then a door at the end of the passage opened; the girl in white came out and closed the door softly. She breathed as though she had been running; she adjusted her wrap before she turned round.

And Jim Matthews stepped in front of her.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Yes?"

She spoke coldly, with sudden calmness. Tony Caplin, Jim thought, knew how to choose his employees. This girl was a limb of the Orient Club, probably as skilful in the crafts of blackmail as Francine herself; but she could have passed anywhere. Both her features and her voice had that fine-drawnness which is supposed to indicate breeding; her brown eyes and the arch of the eyebrows showed cold wonder as she looked back at him.

"Would you mind telling me," Jim continued, "what you were doing with that wallet you put in your handbag a minute ago?"

"Wallet? Really? What wallet?"

"Oh, stow it," said Jim. The way he spoke was caused by mingled anger and disappointment. "I'm a police officer, miss."

This startled her, no less than the stolid tone he had deliberately adopted. He saw in her face incredulity, doubt, fear, and growing underneath them, a certain amusement.

"Really? I see. You're one of those people who have a terribly good time and then arrest the management for selling drinks after hours."

"I have nothing to do with that." He tried not to speak hotly. "I only ask you, would you mind explaining what you were doing with that wallet?"

"So I suppose I shall have to tell you. I picked it up off the floor. Oh, yes, that's quite true. Not being able to appreciate the charms of Miss Francine Rapport, which evidently stagger you men so, I went out to the bar during her dance. On the way I picked up the wallet. Naturally, when the lights went on I wanted to find the proper owner."

"Then why didn't you?"

"What on earth do you think I'm doing here? Miss Rapport, I understand" she spoke with a degree of quiet hatred "is part-owner here. I am sorry if the proper procedure is to stand up on a table and shout that you have found a wallet. I thought of taking it to Miss Rapport."

"And did you give it to her?"

For the first time the girl's eyes shifted.

"No. She she isn't here. Evidently she didn't come back here after her dance. Perhaps you'd be good enough to let me pass so that I could take the wallet to Mr. Caplin? Come with me, if you like. By all means."

Someone was humming dreamily. Along the passage strutted a good-looking maidservant in cap and apron. She was a blonde, but her looks were of such an order that Jim suspected a touch of negro blood. Carrying a dressing-gown over her arm, she gave them a pleasantly impudent look as she wormed past to open the door.

The girl in white made an attempt to get away. Jim saw the intention in her eyes; he closed his fingers round her wrist. Just at that moment the door was

opened and, after the fraction of a second, the maid screamed.

"I didn't do it," the girl in white cried. "I swear I didn't do it!"

Even from the doorway they could see it. In an untidy dressing-room of pseudo-Oriental garishness, Francine Rapport sat at a dressing-table before a mirror ringed with lights. She lay forward across the table, her elaborate head-dress awry. Her back was bare except for the fastenings of a broad metal breastplate, which winked and glimmered under a film of oil. The bangles had slid down from her arms like coiled snakes. And she was not a pleasant sight, for she had been stabbed through the back with a pair of long and narrow-bladed scissors.

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Still gripping the wrist of the girl in white, Jim went in. Murder! A murder case for the first time in his short police experience. He felt a slight physical queasiness. The woman had died very recently; and, despite the clumsiness of the weapon, from a direct heart-wound. There were no signs of disorder on the dressing-table except that a sandalwood box was open and a fragment of paper was pressed in the dead woman's contorted fingers.

Faintly along the passage from the dance-floor, hollow and soothing out of a microphone, drifted Tony Caplin's rich voice: "A selection of o-old, old favourites, beginning with the immortal 'Bye-bye, Blackbird.' Let her go-oh, boys."

Jim turned to the maid.

"Who are you?"

"Me? I'm Paula." In an extremity of terror she pressed her hands to the sides of her head and wagged it, an old gesture of her ancestry.

"Her maid?"

"Eh?"

"Miss Rapport's maid?"

"Yes, *sir*. Who wants to know?" She glared at him.

Jim told her. "Were you here when she came back from her dance a few minutes ago?"

"I wasn't! I wasn't, and I can prove I wasn't! She gave me a message to take to Mr. Caplin, to come and see her when she'd finished her dance, and that's what I went and told him. And——"

"Steady. Do you know which is table number sixteen out there? Right, then. At table sixteen you'll find a big, heavy-set man; sandy moustache, short hair, speckled kind of face. His name is Colonel March. Ask him if he can come in here, but don't mention this to anyone else. Got that?"

When the maid was gone, Jim bent closer to the dressing-table. It was easy to make out a few words written on the fragment of paper in Francine Rapport's hand: '*like this. Ever your adoring—Tommy.*' The smooth, clean fingers, with their nails dyed purple, held to this as though they held someone even in death.

Jim Matthews did not touch anything. This was not the concern of Department D-3. He and Colonel March were at the Orient Club in search of a super-pickpocket, and they had evidently found her; but someone has to take charge when a pickpocket tells lies within ten feet of a murdered woman. He led the girl in white to a chair.

"Let me have your name and address, please."

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you that."

Jim shut up his notebook. "That's your privilege," he said. "I also want you to understand that you're not bound to answer any questions I may ask you. But if you'd only realize——"

"I don't mind answering your questions," said the girl, and the tears started into her eyes. "It can't be much worse for me than it is, can it?"

"Then why didn't you tell me you knew she was dead?"

"Do you think I'm insane? You'd only have thought exactly what you did think. But I didn't kill her. I came in here, and found her dead, and came out again. That's all I know. All I wanted to do was get away. I don't expect you to believe that. I probably shouldn't believe it myself if I were in your place; but it's the truth."

She sat back in the chair with an expression of cool despair.

"Then what about that wallet?"

"It's Tony Caplin's wallet. You might as well know that now."

"You stole it?"

"No. Don't worry. I'm not going to assume a pose of injured innocence, or jump up and fly into a tantrum: as she used to do." Her eyes moved towards Francine. "But I really didn't steal it. He dropped it. He dropped it, I tell you!"

"Have you still got the wallet? You'd better let me have it, then."

An expression of cynicism came into her face, a kind of pleasure as though in some ironical secret. If he had not seen her other expression when she was off guard, he

could have believed her. Without a word she opened her handbag, took out the wallet, and handed it to him. It was of plain black leather, without name or initials, but its contents were damning enough. This was no ordinary wallet: it contained, neatly folded, a thousand pounds in fifty-pound notes.

They were startled by an exclamation from the doorway. Tony Caplin was staring with a sickly look at the woman sprawled across the dressing-table.

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Even those who knew Caplin's crookedness or his innate viciousness were compelled to admit his charm. He went through the world with the manner and the voice of a perpetual radio-announcer. Not bad air or drinks or late hours seemed to impair his alertness. His wiry dark hair, his pleasant light eyes and close-shaven jaw, made him look like an advertisement in a chemist's window. But all this was gone now.

He said: "Who are you?" And then, in a higher key: "My God, what is it?"

"Steady, sir! Don't touch anything!"

Caplin had hurried to Francine. He touched her shoulder, and then he began to beat his fist into his palm in a kind of frenzy.

"She's dead," he said.

"Yes. We —"

"They got her," said Caplin. "She was all I had. Who did it? Tell me who did it and I'll kill him! I mean that." He whirled round towards the girl in white. "Who's that? Who are you?"

All this time Jim Matthews felt that the girl was studying

Caplin. He could not interpret her expression. But she appealed to Matthews.

"At least"—she spoke with quiet urgency—"you can clear up one thing. I mean, about that wallet. Mr. Caplin can clear it up: it's his wallet. I saw him drop it. And he can tell you who I am, too; he can vouch for me."

Jim held it out.

"Is this your wallet, sir?"

"To hell with the wallet," snarled Caplin. Then he blinked, and his bewilderment grew. "What wallet? Where? What are you talking about?"

"Does this belong to you?"

"Certainly not."

"And I suppose you'll say, too," insisted the girl in a soft, steady voice, "that you don't know me either?"

Caplin spoke with a sort of desperate courtesy. "Madam, I don't know what you're talking about. I do know that Francine's dead. I loved Francine. I come in here and find her like this, with a pair of scissors——" He stopped, his face working as though he were going to weep. "—and all you people can do is babble about a wallet, wallet, wallet. No, I don't know who you are. I never saw you before in my life. Did you kill her?"

"Did *you*?" asked the girl.

The other had got a grip on himself.

"I've done a lot of things in my life," he answered grimly. "To judge by the number of police in the place to-night, they think I've done a lot more. But there's one thing I didn't do. I didn't kill Francine. I never left that orchestra platform from the time she was dancing until one minute ago."

That was true. Jim admitted it to himself; and so, by the look on her face, did the girl.

"Fifty people will testify to that. For once in my life," muttered Caplin, a savage and surprised look coming into his eyes, "for once in my life I'm in the clear when dirty work's been done. And *this* kind of dirty work. This kind!"

"Quite so," agreed a new voice. "This kind."

It belonged to Colonel March. The seventeen stone of Colonel March filled the doorway. His thumbs were hooked in the pockets of his white waistcoat; he was as bland as ever, but his eye looked wicked.

"Hello, copper," observed Tony Caplin—yet without offence.

"Good evening," said Colonel March.

"Come to run us all in?"

"No," said Colonel March seriously. "I've telephoned the divisional station about this. They will take charge. I really came to break up your newest and, I think, most ingenious racket."

"I don't understand that," said Caplin sharply.

Colonel March studied him. Behind that huge façade there was a kind of admiration.

"My good Anthony," he said, "confound you for a genius! You don't use guns. You don't use knock-out drops. You don't even need a chucker-out. Your weapon is psychology." His grin became broad and sinister. "Wherever the Orient Club opens up, as it does fairly frequently, you have some new and foolproof device for separating the gullible from their money. Paris and New York testify to that. Here you are more subtle; but you've got a real jewel. It took me several days with a wet towel round my head to decide what it was."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Pocket-picking in Futurist style. Pocket-picking in which the guest doesn't even know he's been robbed."

As though casually, Colonel March went over and stared down at the body of Francine Rapport. He did not seem concerned with it. He went on speaking without looking at Caplin or the girl.

"Not ordinary pocket-picking," he assured them. "That's much too dangerous. All guests at night clubs have a drink; some have a tolerable number of drinks; still others (I think the fact is well known) have too many drinks. So there would be too much of a row if the pocket-picking were discovered even once. And a whole epidemic of it would put the Orient Club in very bad odour with its customers. But there is a better way.

"Now, a man with a good number of drinks inside him seldom remembers exactly how much money he has got in his wallet. When he totals it up at the end of the evening, and finds three pounds or a fiver less than he expected, he simply assumes that he must have spent it himself. Just as we all do. Certainly he never thinks of his wallet being lifted; lifted and deftly returned, minus as much as the Orient Club thought he could spare without noticing it. The method is harmless and very nearly undetectable. But the takings at the end of the week must be enormous. Mr. Caplin, I congratulate you."

There was a pause. Jim Matthews could not read Caplin's face.

"He's gone off his head," Caplin said critically. "I don't think you can prove what you're saying."

Colonel March turned round from the dressing-table.

"I'm afraid not," he agreed. "Just when we were trying to prove it, this young lady butted in."

"So," said the girl in white, "you think I'm a pick-pocket?"

"No," Colonel March said. "I think I know who you are now, though I don't blame Matthews for being taken in. Your name is probably Joan Forsythe. You live in Kensington, at an address I can't for the moment remember, and you have a brother named Thomas in the Diplomatic Service. I can also guess what you were doing with that wallet."

The girl sprang to her feet.

"You did not take it from anybody," he told her dryly. "On the contrary, you were trying to give it to somebody. To Mr. Caplin, in fact. Would you mind telling me, Matthews, exactly what happened here?"

His face was sardonic as Matthews explained. He took the wallet and held it up before the girl.

"Ah, yes. I see. This contains the blackmail money that Caplin and Rapport wanted from your brother for his affair with Miss Rapport. Gad, what a reminiscent note! You were instructed to hand the money to Caplin in public, in the presence of witnesses, in a wallet, and with the covering words: 'This is your wallet, isn't it?' You went to give it to him by the orchestra-platform; but at the last minute you lost your nerve and tried to fling it at Miss Rapport instead.

"That's another of their games," Colonel March added sadly. "The one they tried in Paris."

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All Caplin's bounce and energy had come back to him

His eyes were still a little hysterical, like those of an actor who has played an exhausting part. But he did not seem to take offence; he only shook his head sceptically.

"You're going too fast, my friend," he suggested. "You could get into trouble, you know, talking like that. *I* don't know what you're talking about. But then you're telling me, aren't you?"

"Is he?" said the girl through her teeth.

For a second or two she did not seem to know whether to feel relief, or anger, or an even worse despair. But it was a slipping of the glazed determination, which showed a very human being underneath; human, and a little petulant.

"You've seen Tommy," she flared out at Colonel March.

"Not exactly, Miss Forsythe. He came to us last week; and then lost his nerve and refused to set a trap. There was nothing else we could do about it."

"Well, what else could I do? I had to get back those letters Tommy wrote her. It wouldn't have mattered twopence, don't you see, if Tommy hadn't been in the Diplomatic Service? But he's got a wonderful opportunity; he'll be sent to Paris or Rome if nothing happens. He won't help himself, and I—well, I——"

"Look here," muttered Jim Matthews. "I seem to have made an ass of myself again. Sorry, sir."

"Why should you be sorry?" asked Joan Forsythe. "You may not have caught a pickpocket. But how do you know you haven't caught a murderess? Look there. Look in her hand. Look at that piece of paper, signed by her adoring Tommy. That's torn off one of my brother's letters; and our wonderful Mr. Caplin knows it as well as I do."

"I don't know what Francine has been up to," said Caplin: "About letters, that is. If she wanted to sell some letters, that was her business. But if there were letters, where are they now?"

Colonel March took the question with great seriousness. Again he bent over to peer at the letter, unfolding the fingers so that he could look at the smooth, soft palm of the hand as well. The hand and arm seemed to interest him as much as the fragment of paper.

"Well, Miss Forsythe?" he asked over his shoulder. "Did you get the letters?"

"No, no, no! I've told you before. I told you," she appealed to Jim, "that she was dead when I got here. I was only here half a minute, anyway. I haven't got any letters; you can search me if you like. *He* had the letters. He probably still has them."

"I never had any letters," said Caplin.

Joan Forsythe pulled herself together. She studied Caplin in a curious way; and she spoke in a new, detached, wondering tone.

"You know," she said, "you really are a nasty bit of work."

"That may be," agreed Caplin frankly. "We're none of us perfect, not even you. But you see, Miss So-and-So, you're in a jam. A bad jam. You ought to understand that, for your own good. And, honestly, you oughtn't to be so free with your accusations. Now, I'm not in a jam at all. I didn't kill that poor kid; I couldn't have killed her. The coppers themselves will tell you I never left that orchestra-platform at any time."

The girl appealed to Colonel March. "Is that true?"

"It is quite true, Miss Forsythe."

"You see?" said Caplin.

"No, I don't see," answered Joan Forsythe, in the same puzzled voice. She made a gesture. "What I can't get over is a kind of cheap meanness about the whole thing. It doesn't seem big or terrible or even tragic. It only seems grimy and mean. My brother isn't any persecuted figure who's guilty of a lot of high crimes. But just because he can't afford scandal, and goes out and makes a fool of himself over that woman, they're all ready and waiting to make money out of it. They're so used to helping themselves at other people's expense that they don't even see anything very strange in it. They only say to you, in a surprised kind of way, 'Well, of course you'll have to pay now for what we know, so pay up and let's have no more nonsense.' "

She drew a deep breath.

"Maybe they're right. I don't know. All I know is that it cost Tommy and me nearly everything we've got to scrape that money together. There must be lots of poor fools like us. I don't know whether you believe what this man tells you; but you seem to. Whatever you mean to do to me, there'll be a dreadful scandal at the end of it; and poor Tommy in the middle. The clever ones of this world have it all their own way, haven't they?"

"I think not, Miss Forsythe," said Colonel March.

And they all looked at him.

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The abrupt stillness in the Orient Club, a sort of clang of stillness, reached farther than this dressing-room. The music of the orchestra, after wobbling, had stopped in the middle of a bar. The mutter of voices from the dance-

floor, after rising abruptly, had died away; and Jim Matthews knew why. The crowd had seen police uniforms at the front door.

But Colonel March, his arms folded, did not seem to notice.

"You," he said sharply, turning his head towards the door. "Paula, I think your name is. The maid. Come in here, please."

Paula obeyed. She entered like a cat; not straight, but moving round the corner of the jamb. Though she did not seem nervous, there was defiance in her full-rounded eyes.

"Paula," Colonel March repeated. "Paula, Paula. Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

The reply was fired back quickly.

"Maybe happen you have. I was at the Tin-Hat Club two, three years. And at the Odalisque for six months."

"I have never been at the Tin-Hat Club. No: haven't I seen you more recently than that?"

Paula shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, we'll omit that," said Colonel March in a curious voice. "How many dressing-rooms are there here, can you tell me?"

"Two besides this, sir."

"Any other cabaret turns besides Miss Rapport's?"

"No."

"And the girls I mean, the dance-hostesses: did they change in these rooms?"

Caplin was about to intervene; but Paula, keeping her eyes full and hypnotic, got in before him. "No. Other side. Miss Rapport wouldn't let them."

"When did you last see Miss Rapport alive?"

Paula snatched at this. "I passed her when she came off the floor, that's what. She gave me a message for Mr. Caplin."

"So you have an alibi, too. Just one other thing," observed Colonel March, with sudden politeness. "We came here to look for a very good pickpocket. So we may as well be thorough. Let me have a look at your hands, will you?"

"My hands?"

"Both hands."

She hesitated, flashing a look at Caplin; but she stretched them out.

"If," said Caplin, "you're saying Polly had anything to do with killing Francine, you're wrong. Fifty witnesses can prove it. She was out on the dance-floor the whole time. And if you're saying she's a pickpocket, you must be completely off your nut." Then he shouted: "What do you think you'll find on her hand, anyway? Beeswax?"

"No," said Colonel March. "Only oil. And you're quite right: she was out on the dance-floor the whole time."

Paula jerked away her hand as though she had burnt it. But Colonel March still had her gently by the other arm; and he did not let go.

"We've noticed several things about Francine Rapport," he went on. "She performed her Javanese dance in a blue spotlight, and with her face done into such a grotesque mask of paint that nobody could recognize it. But note the colour of her skin; and compare it with Paula's. Note her height and build; and compare them with Paula's. Yes, Paula was on the dance-floor, impersonating Francine in the temple dance, while Francine lay dead in

this room. And, if you don't want to be accused of the murder yourself, young lady" he swung a screaming Paula round to face him "you had better admit that your friend Caplin stabbed Rapport with the scissors just before she was due to come out for her dance."

Tony Caplin tried to wrench her away from Colonel March, and shake sense into her. But she was a bad accomplice. She had convicted both of them before the Divisional Detective-Inspector reached the room.

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"The trick," Colonel March said to Joan Forsythe and Matthews afterwards, "was simple enough; and very easy to perform without a hitch. Our ingenious Mr. Caplin, who thought he deserved all the good things of life, was fed up with Francine. She was a nuisance. She was a nagger. She was ageing. She wanted too much money. So the partner had to be eliminated.

"It was easy to train Paula in the routine of the dance, as he had trained Francine. It was easy to manage the substitution: there were no other cabaret turns at the Orient Club, and nobody else came near those dressing-rooms. Paula could be seen, of course, only in her make-up, the head-dress hiding her hair, and in that dim disguising blue spot-light. She could not be seen close at hand. When Francine had just finished changing into costume a few minutes before the dance, Caplin stabbed her while Paula was getting into a duplicate costume in an adjoining (empty) dressing-room.

"Paula came out, locked the door of Francine's room so that no one should discover the body too soon, took the key with her, and went out to dance. Afterwards she

returned, unlocked the door, got into her ordinary clothes in the empty dressing-room, and was ready to appear in a very few minutes. All this time, of course, Caplin was preparing an impregnable alibi. That was the purpose of the whole scheme; and it entailed an alibi for Paula as well. Caplin was ready to swear to her presence near him should anyone question her.

"They did not particularly care who found the body. But I am certain they never intended *you* to find it, Miss Forsythe. On the contrary, Caplin must have been rather sick when you did not approach and hand him his thousand pounds. Afterwards, with the police there, he could hardly claim it when by an unfortunate mischance suspicion was plumped down on you. He never intended that scrap of paper to be found in the victim's fist. He asked for the letters from Francine, stabbed her as she was taking them out of that sandalwood box, and unfortunately tore them from her hand too quickly. So he had to attack you in order to protect himself."

Colonel March looked away musingly.

"Since we found the letters on Caplin, they won't be any trouble to your brother in the future. But I give you my word you were never in any great danger. It was plain from the first that there had been a substitution of identities——"

"From the first?" demanded Joan Forsythe. "But how?"

"That's what I should like to know, sir," agreed Jim Matthews, with a certain gloom. He looked at the girl, who laughed.

"They forgot the oil," said Colonel March. "You may have noticed the coating of oil put on all those large metal

ornaments to give them the blurred, mysterious gleam in imitation of the real temple dance. The dance consisted of a series of evolutions with the dancer's hands and arms pressed flat against her body or brushing against it. We saw that. The palms of Francine's hands, and her arms, should have had a film of oil from brushing against the ornaments. They hadn't: we saw that too. Still, it was clear before then. Francine Rapport had been doing that dance for a long time. She could not have forgotten the quality called tempo. She finished her dance too soon, with the orchestra going wild. I did not know who the dancer was. But I hardly thought it could be Francine Rapport."

The Silver Curtain

THE croupier's wrist moved with such fluent ease as to seem boneless. Over the green baize its snaky activity never hesitated, never wavered, never was still. His rake, like an enormous butter-pat, attracted the cards, flicked them up, juggled them, and slid them in a steady stream through the slot of the table.

No voice was raised in the Casino at La Bandelette. There was much casualness; hardly any laughter. The tall red curtains and the padded red floors closed in a sort of idle concentration at a dozen tables. And out of it, at table number six, the croupier's monotone droned on.

"Six mille. Banco? Six mille. Banco? Banco?"

"Banco," said the young Englishman across the table. The cards, white and grey, slipped smoothly from the shoe. And the young man lost again.

The croupier hadn't time to notice much. The people round him, moving in hundreds through the season, were hardly human beings at all. There was a calculating machine inside his head; he heard its clicks, he watched the run of its numbers, and it was all he had time for. Yet so acutely were his senses developed that he could tell almost within a hundred francs how much money the players at his table still retained. The young man opposite was nearly broke.

(Best to be careful. This perhaps means trouble.)

Casually the croupier glanced round his table. There

were five players, all English, as was to be expected. There was the fair-haired girl with the elderly man, obviously her father, who had a bald head and looked ill; he breathed behind his hand. There was the very heavy, military-looking man whom someone had addressed as Colonel March. There was the fat, sleek, swarthy young man with the twisty eyebrows (dubious English?), whose complacency had grown with his run of luck and whose wallet stuffed with *mille* notes lay at his elbow. Finally, there was the young man who lost so much.

The young man got up from his chair.

He had no poker face. The atmosphere about him was so desperately embarrassed that the fair-haired girl spoke.

"Leaving, Mr. Winton?" she asked.

"Er—yes," said Mr. Winton. He seemed grateful for that little help thrown into his disquiet. He seized at it; he smiled back at her. "No luck yet. Time to get a drink and offer up prayers for the next session."

(Look here, thought Jerry Winton, why stand here explaining? It's not serious. You'll get out of it, even if it does mean a nasty bit of trouble. They all know you're broke. Stop standing here laughing like a gawk, and get away from the table. He looked into the eyes of the fair-haired girl, and wished he hadn't been such an ass.)

"Get a drink," he repeated.

He strode away from the table with (imagined) laughter following him. The sleek young man had lifted a moon-face and merely looked at him in a way that roused Jerry Winton's wrath.

Curse La Bandelette and baccara and everything else.

"There," reflected the croupier, "is a young man who

will have trouble with his hotel. *Banco? Six mille. Banco?*"

In the bar, which adjoined the casino-rooms, Jerry Winton crawled up on one of the high stools, called for an Armagnac, and pushed his last hundred-franc note across the counter. His head was full of a row of figures written in the spidery style of France. His hotel-bill for a week would come to—what? Four, five, six thousand francs? It would be presented to-morrow, and all he had was his return ticket to London by plane.

In the big mirror behind the bar a new image emerged from the crowd. It was that of the fat, sleek, oily-faced young man who had cleaned up such a packet at the table, and who was even now fingering his wallet lovingly before he put it away. He climbed up on a stool beside Jerry. He called for mineral water: how shrewd and finicky-crafty these expert gamblers were! He relighted the stump of a cigar in one corner of his mouth.

Then he spoke.

"Broke?" he inquired off-handedly.

Jerry Winton glared at his reflection in the mirror.

"I don't see," Jerry said, with a slow and murderous choosing of words, "that that's anybody's business except mine."

"Oh, that's all right," said the stranger, in the same unpleasantly off-handed tone. He took several puffs at his cigar; he drank a little mineral water. He added: "I expect it's pretty serious, though? Eh?"

"If the matter," said Jerry, turning round, "is of so much interest to you: no, it's not serious. I have plenty of money back home. The trouble is that this is Friday night, and I can't get in touch with the bank until Monday." Though this was quite true, he saw the other's

fishy expression grow broader. "It's a damned nuisance, because they don't know me at the hotel. But a nuisance is all it is. If you think I'm liable to go out in the garden and shoot myself, stop thinking it."

The other smiled sadly and fishily, and shook his head.

"You don't say? I can't believe that, now can I?"

"I don't care what you believe."

"You should care," said his companion, unruffled. As Jerry slid down from the stool, he reached out and tapped Jerry on the arm. "Don't be in such a rush. You say you're a boy Cræsus. All right: you're a boy Cræsus. I won't argue with you. But tell me: how's your nerve?"

"My what?"

"Your nerve. Your courage," explained his companion, with something like a sneer.

Jerry Winton looked back at the bland, self-assured face poised above the mineral water. His companion's feet were entangled with the legs of the bar-stool; his short upper lip was lifted with acute self-confidence; and a blank eye jeered down.

"I thought I'd ask," he pursued. "My name is Davos, Ferdie Davos. Everybody knows me." He swept his hand towards the crowd. "How'd you like to make ten thousand francs?"

"I'd like it a whole lot. But I don't know whether I'd like to make it out of any business of yours."

Davos was unruffled. "It's no good trying to be on your dignity with me. It don't impress me and it won't help you. I still ask: how would you like to make ten thousand francs? That would more than cover what you owe or are likely to owe, wouldn't it? I thought so. Do you or don't you want to make ten thousand francs?"

"Yes, I do," Jerry snarled back.

"All right. See a doctor."

"*What?*"

"See a doctor," Davos repeated coolly. "A nerve tonic is what you want: pills. No, I'm not wise-cracking." He looked at the clock, whose hands stood at five minutes to eleven. "Go to this address—listen carefully while I tell you—and there'll be ten thousand in it for you. Go to this address in about an hour. No sooner, no later. Do your job properly, and there may be even more than ten thousand in it for you. Number two, Square St. Jean, Avenue des Phares, in about an hour. We'll see how your nerve is then."

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La Bandelette, 'the fillet,' that strip of silver beach along the channel, is full of flat-roofed and queerly painted houses which give it the look of a town in a Walt Disney film. But the town itself is of secondary consideration. The English colony, which is of a frantic fashionableness, lies among great trees behind. Close to the Casino de la Forêt are three great hotels, gay with awning and piling sham Gothic turrets into the sky. The air is aromatic; open carriages clop and jingle along broad avenues; and the art of extracting money from guests has become so perfected that we find our hands going to our pockets even in sleep.

This sleep is taken by day. By night, when La Bandelette is sealed up except for the Casino, the beam of the great island lighthouse sweeps the streets. It dazzles and then dies, once every twenty seconds. And, as Jerry Winton strode under the trees towards the

Avenue of the Lighthouses, its beam was beginning to be blurred by rain.

Square St. Jean, Avenue des Phares. Where? And why?

If Davos had approached him in any other way, Jerry admitted to himself, he would have paid no attention to it. But he was annoyed and curious. Besides, unless there were a trick in it, he could use ten thousand francs. There was probably a trick in it. But who cared?

It was the rain that made him hesitate. He heard it patter in the trees, and deepen to a heavy rustling, as he saw the signboard pointing to the Avenue des Phares. He was without hat or coat. But by this time he meant to see the thing through.

Ahead of him was a street of fashionable villas, lighted by mere sparks of gas. An infernally dark street. Something queer, and more than queer, about this. Total strangers didn't ask you how strong your nerves were, and then offer you ten thousand francs on top of it, for any purpose that would pass the customs. Which was all the more reason why . . .

Then he saw Davos.

Davos did not see him. Davos was ahead of him, walking fast and with little short steps along the dim street. The white beam of the lighthouse shone out overhead, turning the rain to silver; and Jerry could see the gleam of his polished black hair and the light tan topcoat he was now wearing. Pulling up the collar of his dinner-jacket, Jerry followed.

A few yards farther on Davos slackened his pace. He peered round and up. On his left was the entrance to a courtyard, evidently the Square St. Jean. But to call it a

'square' was noble overstatement; it was only a cul-de-sac some twenty feet wide by forty feet deep.

Two of its three sides were merely tall, blank brick walls. The third side, on the right, was formed of a tall flat house all of whose windows were closely shuttered. But there was at least a sign of life about the house. Over its door burned a dim white globe, showing that there was a doctor's brass name-plate beside the door. A sedate house with blue-painted shutters in the bare cul-de-sac—and Davos was making for it.

All this Jerry saw at a glance. Then he moved back from the cul-de-sac. The rain was sluicing down on him, blurring the dim white globe with shadow and gleam. Davos had almost reached the doctor's door. He had paused, as though to consider or look at something; and then . . .

Jerry Winton later swore that he had taken his eyes off Davos only for a second. This was true. Jerry, in fact, had glanced back along the Avenue des Phares behind him and was heartened to see the figure of a policeman some distance away. What made him look quickly back again was a noise from the cul-de-sac, a noise that was something between a cough and a scream, bubbling up horribly under the rain; and afterwards the thud of a body on asphalt.

One moment Davos had been on his feet. The next moment he was lying on his side on the pavement, and kicking.

Overhead the beam of the lighthouse wheeled again. Jerry, reaching Davos in a run of half a dozen long strides, saw the whole scene picked out by that momentary light. Davos's fingers still clutched, or tried to clutch, the

well-filled wallet Jerry had last seen at the Casino. His tan topcoat was now dark with rain. His heels scraped on the pavement, for he had been stabbed through the back of the neck with a heavy knife whose polished-metal handle projected four inches. Then the wallet slipped out of his fingers, and splashed into a puddle, for the man died.

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Jerry Winton looked, and did not believe his own eyes. Mechanically he reached down and picked up the wallet out of the puddle, shaking it. He backed away as he heard running footfalls pound into the cul-de-sac, and he saw the flying waterproof of a policeman.

"Halt there!" the law shouted in French. The policeman, a dim shape under the waterproof, pulled up short and stared. After seeing what was on the pavement, he made a noise like a man hit in the stomach.

Jerry pulled his wits together and conned over his French for the proper phrases.

"His this wallet," said Jerry, extending it.

"So I see."

"He is dead."

"That would appear obvious," agreed the other, with a kind of snort. "Well! Give it to me. Quick, quick, quick! His wallet."

The policeman extended his hand, snapping the fingers. He added: "No stupidities, if you please! I am prepared for you."

"But I didn't kill him."

"That remains to be seen."

"Man, you don't think——?"

He broke off. The trouble was that it had happened

too rapidly. Jerry's feeling was that of one who meets a super-salesman and under whirlwind tactics is persuaded to buy some huge and useless article before he realizes what the talk is all about.

For here was a minor miracle. He had seen the man Davos stabbed under his eyes. Davos had been stabbed by a straight blow from behind, the heavy knife entering in a straight line sloping a little upwards, as though the blow had been struck from the direction of the pavement. Yet at the same time Davos had been alone in an empty cul-de-sac as bare as a biscuit-box.

"It is not my business to think," said the policeman curtly. "I make my notes and I report to my commissaire. Now!" He withdrew into the shelter of the dim-lit doorway, his wary eye fixed on Jerry, and whipped out his notebook. "Let us have no nonsense. You killed this man and attempted to rob him. I saw you."

"No!"

"You were alone with him in this court. I saw as much myself."

"Yes, that is true."

"Good; he admits it! You saw no one else in the court?"

"No."

"*Justement*. Could any assassin have approached without being seen?"

Jerry, even as he saw the bleak eye grow bleaker, had to admit that this was impossible. On two sides were blank brick walls; on the third side was a house whose door or windows, he could swear, had not opened a crack. In the second's space of time while he looked away, no murderer could have approached, stabbed Davos, and got

back to cover again. There was no cover. This was so apparent that Jerry could not even think of a reasonable lie. He merely stuttered.

"I do not know what happened," he insisted. "One minute he was there, and then he fell. I saw nobody." Then a light opened in his mind. "Wait! That knife there - it must have been thrown at him."

Rich and sardonic humour stared at him from the doorway. "Thrown, you say? Thrown from where?"

"I don't know," admitted Jerry. The light went out. Again he stared at blank brick walls, and at the house from whose sealed front no knife could have been thrown.

"Consider," pursued his companion, in an agony of logic, "the position of the knife. This gentleman was walking with his back to you?"

"Yes."

"Good; we progress." He pointed. "The knife enters the back of his neck in a straight line. It enters from the direction where you were standing. Could it have been thrown past you from the entrance to the court?"

"No. Impossible."

"No. That is evident," blared his companion. "I cannot listen to any more stupidities. I indulge you because you are English and we have orders to indulge the English. But this goes beyond reason! You will go with me to the Hôtel de Ville. Look at the note-case in his hand. Does he offer it to you and say: 'Monsieur, honour me by accepting my note-case'?"

"No. He had it in his own hand."

"He had it in his own hand, say you. Why?"

"I don't know."

Jerry broke off, both because the story of his losses at

the Casino must now come out with deadly significance, and because they heard the rattle of a door being unlocked. The door of the doctor's house opened; and out stepped the fair-haired girl whom Jerry had last seen at the Casino.

Beside the door the brass name-plate read, 'Dr. Edouard Hébert,' with consulting hours inscribed underneath, and an aggressive, 'Speaks English.' Behind the girl, craning his neck, stood a bristly middle-aged man of immense dignity. His truculent eyeglasses had a broad black ribbon which seemed to form a kind of electrical circuit with the ends of his brushed-up moustache.

But Jerry Winton was not looking at Dr. Hébert. He was looking at the girl. In addition to a light fur coat, she now wore a cream-coloured scarf drawn over her hair; she had in one hand a tiny box, wrapped in white paper. Her smooth, worried face, her long, pale-blue eyes, seemed to reflect the expression of the dead man staring back at her from the pavement. She jerked back, bumping into the policeman. She put her hand on Dr. Hébert's arm. With her other hand she pointed sharply to Davos.

"That's the man!" she cried.

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M. Goron, prefect of Police, was a comfortable man, a round, cat-like amiable sort of man, famous for his manners. Crime, rare in La Bandelette, distressed him. But he was also an able man. At one o'clock in the morning he sat in his office at the town hall examining his finger-nails and creaking back and forth in a squeaky swivel chair whose noise had begun to get on Jerry Winton's nerves.

The girl, who for the tenth time had given her name as Eleanor Hood, was insistent.

"M. Goron!"

"Mademoiselle?" said the prefect politely, and seemed to wake out of a dream.

Eleanor Hood turned round and gave Jerry Winton a despairing look.

"I only wish to know," she urged, in excellent French, "why we are here, Dr. Hébert and I. And Mr. Winton too, if it comes to that." This time the look she gave Jerry was one of smiling companionship: a human sort of look, which warmed that miscreant. "But as for us—why? It is not as though we were witnesses. I have told you why I was at Dr. Hébert's house."

"Mademoiselle's father," murmured M. Goron.

"Yes. He is ill. Dr. Hébert has been treating him for several days, and he had another attack at the Casino to-night. Mr. Winton will confirm that."

Jerry nodded. The old boy at the table, he reflected, had certainly looked ill.

"I took my father back to our hotel, the Brittany, at half-past eleven," the girl went on, speaking with great intensity. "I tried to communicate with Dr. Hébert by telephone. I could not reach him. So I went to his house; it is only a short distance from the hotel. On the way I kept seeing that man—the man you call Davos. I thought he was following me. He seemed to be looking at me from behind every tree. That is why I said, 'That's the man,' when I saw him lying on the pavement with his eyes open. His eyes did not even blink when the rain struck them. It was a horrible sight. I was upset. Do you blame me?"

M. Goron made a sympathetic noise.

"I reached Dr. Hébert's house at perhaps twenty minutes to twelve. Dr. Hébert had retired, but he consented to go with me. I waited while he dressed. We went out, and on the doorstep we found what you know. Please believe that is all I know about it."

She had a singularly expressive voice and personality. She was either all anxiety or all persuasiveness, fashioning the clipped syllables. When she turned her wrist, you saw Davos lying in the rain and the searchlight wheeling overhead. Then she added abruptly in English, looking at Jerry:

"He was a nasty little beast; but I don't for a moment believe you killed him."

"Thanks. But why?"

"I don't know," said Eleanor simply. "You just couldn't have."

"Now there is logic!" cried M. Goron, giving his desk an admiring whack.

M. Goron's swivel chair creaked with pleasure. There were many lights in his office, which smelt of creosote. On the desk in front of him lay Davos's sodden wallet and (curiously) the tiny round box, wrapped in a spill of paper, which Eleanor Hood had been carrying. M. Goron never spoke to Jerry, never looked at him; ignored him as completely and blandly as though he were not there.

"But," he continued, growing very sober again, "you will forgive me, mademoiselle, if I pursue this matter further. You say that Dr. Hébert has been treating your father?"

"Yes."

M. Goron pointed to the small box on the table.

"With pills, perhaps?"

"Ah, my God!" said Dr. Hébert, and slapped his forehead tragically.

For several minutes Jerry had been afraid that the good doctor would have an apoplectic stroke. Dr. Hébert had indicated his distinguished position in the community. He had pointed out that physicians do not go out in the middle of the night on errands of mercy, and then get dragged off to police stations; it is bad for business. His truculent eyeglasses and moustache-bristling, he left off his stiff pacing of the room only to go and look the prefect in the eye.

"I *will* speak," he said coldly, from deep in his throat.

"As monsieur pleases."

"Well, it is as this lady says! Why are we here? Why? We are not witnesses." He broke off, and slapped at the shoulders of his coat as though to rid himself of insects. "This young man here tells us a story which may or may not be true. If it is true, I do not see why the man Davos should have given him *my* address. I do not see why Davos should have been knifed on my doorstep. I did not know the man Davos, except as a patient of mine."

"Ah!" said the prefect. "You gave him pills, perhaps?"

Dr. Hébert sat down.

"Are you mad on the subject of pills?" he inquired, with restraint. "Because this young man"—again he looked with disfavour at Jerry—"tells you that Davos made some drunken mention of 'pills' at the Casino to-night, is that why you pursue the subject?"

"It is possible."

"It is ridiculous," said Dr. Hébert. "Do you even question my pills on the desk there? They are for Miss Hood's father. They are ordinary tablets, with digitalin

for the heart. Do you think they contain poison? If so, why not test them?"

"It is an idea," conceded M. Goron.

He picked up the box and removed the paper.

The box contained half a dozen sugar-coated pellets. With great seriousness M. Goron put one of the tablets into his mouth, tasted it, bit it, and finally appeared to swallow it.

"No poison?" asked the doctor.

"No poison," agreed M. Goron. The telephone on his desk rang. He picked it up, listened for a moment with a dreamy smile, and replaced it. "Now this is really excellent!" he beamed, rubbing his hands. "My good friend Colonel March, of the English police, has been making investigations. He was sent here when a certain form of activity in La Bandelette became intolerable both to the French and English authorities. You perhaps noticed him at the Casino to-night, all of you?"

"I remember," said Jerry suddenly. "Very large bloke, quiet as sin."

"An apt description," said the prefect.

"But——" began Dr. Hébert.

"I said 'all of you,' Dr. Hébert," repeated the prefect. "One small question is permitted? I thank you. When mademoiselle telephoned to your house at eleven-thirty to-night, you were not there. You were at the Casino, perhaps?"

Dr. Hébert stared at him.

"It is possible. But——"

"You saw M. Davos there, perhaps?"

"It is possible." Still Dr. Hébert stared at him with hideous perplexity. "But, M. Goron, will you have the

goodness to explain this? You surely do not suspect either mademoiselle or myself of having any concern with this business? You do not think that either mademoiselle or I left the house at the time of the murder?"

"I am certain you did not."

"You do not think either mademoiselle or myself went near a door or window to get at this accursed Davos?"

"I am certain you did not," beamed the prefect.

"Well, then?"

"But there, you see," argued M. Goron, lifting one finger for emphasis, "we encounter a difficulty. We are among thorns. For this would mean that M. Winton must have committed the murder. And that," he added, looking at Jerry, "is absurd. We never for a moment believed that M. Winton had anything to do with this, and my friend Colonel March will tell you why."

Jerry sat back and studied the face of the prefect, wondering if he had heard aright. He felt like an emotional punching-bag. But with great gravity he returned the prefect's nod as a sergent de ville opened the door of the office.

"We will spik English," announced M. Goron, bouncing up. "This is my friend Colonel March."

"'Evening," said the colonel. His large, speckled face was as bland as M. Goron's; his fists were on his hips. He looked first at Eleanor, then at Jerry, then at Dr. Hébert. "Sorry you were put to this inconvenience, Miss Hood. But I've seen your father, and it will be all right. As for you, Mr. Winton, I hope they have put you out of your misery?"

"Misery?"

"Told you you're not headed for Devil's Island, or

anything of the sort? We had three very good reasons for believing you had nothing to do with this. Here is the first reason."

Reaching into the pocket of his dinner-jacket, he produced an article which he held out to them. It was a black leather note-case, exactly like the one already on M. Goron's desk. But whereas the first was stuffed with *mille* notes, this one had only a few hundred francs in it.

"We found this second note-case in Davos's pocket," said Colonel March.

He seemed to wait for a comment, but none came.

"Well, what about it?" Jerry demanded, after a pause.

"Oh, come! Two note-cases! Why was Davos carrying two note-cases? Why should any man carry two note-cases? That is my first reason. Here is my second."

From the inside pocket of his coat, with the air of a conjurer, he drew out the knife with which Davos had been stabbed.

A suggestive sight. Now cleansed of blood, it was a long, thin, heavy blade with a light metal handle and cross-piece. As Colonel March turned it round, glittering in the light, Jerry Winton felt that its glitter struck a chord of familiarity in his mind: that a scene from the past had almost come back to him: that, for a swift and tantalizing second, he had almost grasped the meaning of the whole problem.

"And now we come to my third reason," said Colonel March. "The third reason is Ferdie Davos. Ferdie was a hotel thief. A great deal too clever for us poor policemen. Eh, Goron? Though I always told him he was a bad judge of men. At the height of the summer season, at hotels like the Brittany and the Donjon, he had rich

pickings. He specialized in necklaces; particularly in pearl necklaces. Kindly note that."

A growing look of comprehension had come into Eleanor Hood's face. She opened her mouth to speak, and then checked herself.

"His problem," pursued Colonel March, "was how to smuggle the stolen stuff over to England, where he had a market for it. He couldn't carry it himself. In a little place like La Bandelette, Goron would have had him turned inside out if he had as much as taken a step towards Boulogne. So he had to have accomplices. I mean accomplices picked from among the hordes of unattached young men who come here every season. Find some young fool who's just dropped more than he can afford at the tables; and he may grab at the chance to earn a few thousand francs by a little harmless customs bilking. You follow me, Mr. Winton?"

"You mean that I was chosen——?"

"Yes."

"But, good lord, how? I couldn't smuggle a pearl necklace through the customs if my life depended on it."

"You could if you needed a tonic," Colonel March pointed out. "Davos told you so. The necklace would first be taken to pieces for you. Each pearl would be given a thick sugar-coating, forming a neat medicinal pill. They would then be poured into a neat bottle or box under the prescription of a well-known doctor. At the height of the tourist rush, the customs can't curry-comb everybody. They would be looking for a pearl-smuggler: not for an obviously respectable young tourist with stomach trouble."

Eleanor Hood, with sudden realization in her face, looked at the box of pills on M. Goron's desk.

"So *that* is why you tasted my pills!" she said to the prefect of police, who made deprecating noises. "And kept me here for so long. And——"

"Mademoiselle, I assure you!" said M. Goron. "We were sure there was nothing wrong with those pills!" He somewhat spoiled the gallant effect of this by adding: "There are not enough of them, for one thing. But, since you received them from Dr. Hébert after office hours, you had to be investigated. The trick is neat, hein? I fear the firm of Hébert and Davos have been working it for some time."

They all turned to look at Dr. Hébert.

He was sitting bolt upright, his chin drawn into his collar as though he were going to sing. On his face was a look of what can only be called frightened scepticism. Even his mouth was half open with this effect, or with unuttered sounds of ridicule.

"We were also obliged to delay you all," pursued M. Goron, "until my men found Madame Fley's pearls, which were stolen a week ago, hidden in Dr. Hébert's surgery. I repeat: it was a neat trick. We might never have seen it if Davos had not incautiously hinted at it to M. Winton. But then Davos was getting a bit above himself." He added: "That, Colonel March thinks, is why Dr. Hébert decided to kill him."

Still Dr. Hébert said nothing.

It was, in fact, Jerry Winton who spoke. "Sir, I don't hold any brief for this fellow. I should think you were right. But how could he have killed Davos? He couldn't have!"

"You are forgetting," said Colonel March, as cheerfully as though the emotional temperature of the room had not

gone up several degrees, "you are forgetting the two note-cases. Why was Davos carrying two note-cases?"

"Well?"

"He wasn't," said Colonel March, with his eye on Hébert. "Our good doctor here was, of course, the brains of the partnership. He supplied the resources for Ferdie's noble front. When Ferdie played baccara at the Casino, he was playing with Dr. Hébert's money. And, when Dr. Hébert saw Ferdie at the Casino to-night, he very prudently took away the large sum you saw in Ferdie's note-case at the tables. When Ferdie came to the doctor's house at midnight, he had only his few hundred francs commission in his own note-case, which was in his pocket.

"You see, Dr. Hébert needed that large sum of money in his plan to kill Ferdie. He knew what time Ferdie would call at his house. He knew Mr. Winton would be close behind Ferdie. Mr. Winton would, in fact, walk into the murder and get the blame. All Dr. Hébert had to do was take that packet of *mille* notes, stuff them into another note-case just like Ferdie Davos's, and use it as a trap."

"A trap?" repeated Eleanor.

"A trap," said Colonel March.

"Your presence, Miss Hood," he went on, "gave the doctor an unexpected alibi. He left you downstairs in his house. He went upstairs to 'get dressed.' A few minutes before Davos was due to arrive, he went quietly up to the roof of his house—a flat roof, like most of those in La Bandelette. He looked down over the parapet into that cul-de-sac, forty feet below. He saw his own doorstep with the lamp burning over it. He dropped that note-case over the parapet, so that it landed on the pavement before his own doorstep.

"Well?" continued Colonel March. "What would Davos do? What would *you* do, if you walked along a pavement and saw a note-case bulging with thousand-franc notes lying just in front of you?"

Again Jerry Winton saw that dim cul-de-sac. He heard the rain splashing; he saw it moving and gleaming past the door-lamp, and past the beam of the lighthouse overhead. He saw the jaunty figure of Davos stop short as though to look at something——

"I imagine," Jerry said, "that I'd bend over and pick up the note-case."

"Yes," said Colonel March. "That's the whole sad story. You would bend over so that your body was parallel with the ground. The back of your neck would be a plain target to anybody standing forty feet up above you, with a needle-sharp knife whose blade is much heavier than the handle. The murderer has merely to drop that knife: stretch out his fingers and drop it. Gravity will do the rest.

"My friend, you looked straight at that murder; and you never saw it. You never saw it because a shifting, gleaming wall of rain, a kind of silver curtain, fell across the door-lamp and the beam of the lighthouse. It hid the fall of a thin, long blade made of bright metal. Behind that curtain moved invisibly our ingenious friend Dr. Hébert, who, if he can be persuaded to speak ——"

Dr. Hébert could not be persuaded to speak, even when they took him away. But Eleanor Hood and Jerry Winton walked home through the summer dawn, under a sky coloured with a less evil silver; and they had discovered any number of mutual acquaintances by the time they reached the hotel.

Error at Daybreak

UNDER the white light of daybreak, the beach seemed deserted for a full half-mile towards the headland. The tide was out, showing a muddy slope at the foot of smooth sand. But it had begun to turn, and flat edges of surf moved snakily back towards the beach.

A narrow lane led down to it, between the high and crooked banks which closed it off from the road. Until you were well out on the sands it was impossible even to see Norman Kane's cottage some distance up towards the right. But one landmark showed in a dark wedge against sand and sea. For several hundred yards out into the water a line of rocks ran in humped formation, curved at the end, in a way that suggested the paw of an animal. It seemed to catch at the incoming tide. Bill Stacey knew it at once for the Lion's Paw, and he set off down the lane towards the beach.

It is to Stacey's credit that he still felt moderately cheerful after having just tramped two miles on an empty stomach, carrying a heavy suitcase. Norman Kane had specified the train he was to take from London, and the wayside station at which it would land him. But Kane had said nothing about a certain lack of transport at that hour of the morning.

The prospect of seeing Marion—Kane's niece and secretary—so cheered him that he forgot the matter. He

did not know whether Kane knew he was in love with Marion. Norman Kane had for him the slightly amused tolerance with which Kane would naturally regard an easy-going journalist like Stacey. And Stacey, in turn, had concealed from a hero-worshipping Marion his belief that Norman Kane was an imposing, dignified, and strenuous crook.

For in his way Kane was a great man, a power in the City and a company-juggler of skill. And he was genuinely fond of Marion, as he was of all his dependants. With his theatricalism went tireless energy; it was only at Dr. Hastings's orders, when he had developed signs of a bad heart, that he had been dragged off for the summer to South Wales.

Heart trouble, Stacey knew, was often the case with these ex-athletes who have run to fat. Kane's worried looks, Marion's worried looks, had disturbed him the last time he saw them. But, as he came out on the beach in the morning light, he felt that nothing ever could happen to Kane.

There was the man himself. Even at a distance he recognized Kane's bulky figure, jauntily wrapped in a dark-red bath-robe with white facings, striding along with a towel over his arm, kicking the sand out of his way with rubber slippers. His bath-robe made a spot of colour against that lonely shore, where the Lion's Paw stretched out into the tide.

And Kane strode out briskly along the Paw. He was not going to bathe. He was going out along the rocks to dive.

"Here!" Stacey said aloud. Swimming, in that sea, with a bad heart? The mutter of the surf was growing as

it drove in, and the farther end of the Paw was already awash.

"Ahoy there!" he yelled. "Kane! Hoy!"

The cry seemed to linger in emptiness across the sands. But it reached Kane, who turned round. He was some fifty yards out on the ridge, but he lifted his towel and waved it.

"Ahoy, my lad!" he bellowed back. "I didn't expect you so early. Come for a dip! The water's fine. Everything is——"

Then it happened.

Stacey never forgot that big, greyish-haired figure, framed against the sea and the dark crook of the Lion's Paw. He was too far away to catch the expression on Kane's face. But Kane's voice died away in a gulp, a puzzled kind of gulp, and his shoulders drew together. For a moment he stood looking at the beach, swaying a little and pressing his arms as though he were cold. Then he pitched forward on his face like a bag of sand.

It was a second or two before Stacey began to run. As he did so he noticed other figures moving on the beach. From some distance away to the right, in the direction of Kane's cottage, he saw Marion running towards him. There was a gleam on her yellow hair; she wore a bathing-suit and a beach-robe blown out by the wind. Behind her lumbered Dr. Hastings, in a white linen suit.

But Stacey did not wait for them. He knew instinctively that something had happened to Norman Kane, something that was worse than a faint.

Along the top of the Lion's Paw there had been worn a natural sunken path some two feet wide. Picking his way out across this, he found Kane's great bulk wedged into it.

Kane's right hand, still clutching the towel, was doubled under him; his left hand lay limply outstretched ahead. Stacey took his pulse, but there was no pulse.

He stood staring down, listening to the slap and swing of the water against the rocks. Heart gone: just like that. At that moment he did not notice the small hole or tear in the back of the dark-red bath-robe, just over the heart. He was too dazed to notice anything more than the fact of death. He hurried back to the beach, where he met Marion and Dr. Hastings.

"Steady," he said, as the girl tried to push past him. "You'd better go out there, doctor. But I'm afraid he's done for."

None of them moved. He could not quite estimate the effect of his words on Kane's niece. He realized, too, that he had never before seen Marion without her glasses, which had added a business-like and almost prim touch to her good looks. Over her shoulder towered Dr. Hastings, whose wiry, close-cut hair had a Teutonic look, and his expression a Teutonic heaviness.

"Oh!" said the girl. She was looking at him curiously, and she breathed hard. "Was it—suicide?"

"Suicide?" repeated Stacey, startled. "No. His heart gave out. Why should you think it was suicide?"

"Oh!" said Marion again. She put her hand on his arm and pressed it. "I want to see him. No, I'm quite all right. I hope I can move. I can't think very well."

Dr. Hastings, who seemed about to launch a violent protest, checked himself and pushed past. They went with him to the body, and watched while he made his examination. Then he urged them back towards the beach.

"Look here," Hastings began heavily. He cleared his

throat, and tried again. "Yes, he's dead right enough; but possibly not for the reason you think. Do you know if Lionel is up yet, Marion?"

So that fellow was at the cottage, thought Stacey. He had never liked the supercilious and æsthetic Mr. Lionel Pell. Norman Kane had once courted Lionel's mother, in the days before she had married the late Mr. Pell; and this seemed to give Lionel the idea that he had some claim on Kane, particularly with regard to sponging.

"Lionel?" repeated Marion. "I—I haven't seen him. I got up and went out for an early bathe at the other side of the bay. But I shouldn't think he was up yet. Why?"

"Because," replied Dr. Hastings with his usual directness, "he'll have to get out his car and drive to the village and get the police. I'm afraid this is murder."

The surf was driving in now, with deepening thunder. A wave veered against the rocks and flung up a ghostly mane of spray. A cold wind had begun to blow from the south, fluttering Marion's beach-robe. She looked at the doctor with rather blind blue eyes, winking as though to keep back tears.

"We had better go up to the house," Hastings went on heavily, "and get something to use as a stretcher: he's a weight to move. There are some bad cross-currents out at this distance when the tide rises, and we don't want him washed out to sea before the police get here."

Then Stacey found his voice.

"The police? Good God, what do you want with the police? His heart——"

"His heart was as sound as yours or mine," said Hastings.

"So," said Marion, "you knew that."

"I should hope I knew it, my dear girl. I happen to be his doctor. Now keep your chin up and let's face the facts. He's been murdered. What little blood there is doesn't show up well against that dark-red bath-robe; but you probably noticed it. And you may have seen the cut in the back of the bath-robe just over the heart."

Stacey put his arm round Marion, who had begun to tremble. He spoke with restraint.

"Look here, Doctor. I don't like to suggest that you're out of your mind, but you might come aside and talk nonsense to me instead of talking it to her. Murdered? How could he have been murdered? He was all alone in this path. There wasn't anybody within a hundred yards of him. You must have seen that for yourself."

"That's true," put in Marion suddenly. "I was sitting up at the top of the beach, up under the bank, getting dry; and I saw him go past. That is true, Doctor."

"Yes. It is true. I saw him from the verandah of the cottage," agreed Hastings.

"Then why all this talk about murder?" asked Stacey. "Hold on! Are you saying he was shot with a long-range rifle, or something of the sort? It would have to be very long range. His back was towards the sea when he was hit, and there were several miles of empty water behind him."

"No, I am not saying that."

"Well?"

"He was killed," answered Dr. Hastings slowly, "with some kind of steel point like an old-fashioned hat-pin. That's what I think, anyhow. I haven't removed it. And I can't swear to the exact nature of the weapon until the post-mortem."

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That afternoon, while the grey rain fell, Superintendent Morgan tramped up to the cottage. He had joined the quiet group assembled inside the verandah—Marion, Dr. Hastings, Lionel Pell, and Bill Stacey sat there. Outside, the sea looked oily and dangerous, as though by its restless movements it were about to burst against the cottage. Superintendent Morgan wore a sou'wester and an oilskin cap; the expression of his face was a contrast to his soft voice.

He glared at Dr. Hastings.

"And that's that," he said. "I'm suggesting to you, Doctor, that you did this deliberately."

"You mean," asked Hastings, examining all sides of the matter, "that I killed Mr. Kane?"

"That is not what I mean. I mean, that you deliberately allowed that body to be washed out to sea. Don't worry. We'll find it. Indeed we will. That was an incoming tide, and it's somewhere along the beach." The superintendent's light eyes opened. His sing-song voice was more disturbing than violent. "I say you deliberately let it be carried off so that we shouldn't find out how Mr. Kane was killed."

"Miss Kane and Mr. Stacey," said Hastings shortly, "will tell you I warned them. I wanted to get a stretcher and move him in time. We were too late, that's all. Why shouldn't I want you to find out how he was killed?"

"Because it's an impossible thing you tell us. The man was alone. No one could have touched him. And yet he was stabbed. There was a way of doing that. If we had found the body we should have known how it was done."

"Probably you would have," agreed Hastings.

There was an ominous silence, broken by the flat

drizzle of the rain. Bill Stacey, sitting beside Marion, did not look at the superintendent. He found himself more curious about another person, a man who lounged across the verandah near the doorway.

The stranger weighed some seventeen stone and his waterproof made him seem even larger. From under a sodden tweed cap a bland blue eye surveyed the company; and from under a cropped moustache, which might be sandy or grey, there projected a large-bowled pipe, at which he seemed to be sniffing. Stacey had heard the superintendent address him as Colonel March. Colonel March listened, but so far had said nothing.

"Meantime," said Superintendent Morgan, taking out a notebook, "there are more queernesses here. I want to hear about them, if you please. Miss Kane!"

Marion glanced up briefly. She had been holding herself in well, Stacey thought, and preserving her blank, 'secretarial' manner.

"We've heard a good deal, hereabouts," Morgan went on, "about Mr. Kane and his bad heart. You tell us you knew he didn't have a bad heart at all."

"I guessed it. So did Dr. Jones in the village, I think."

"Then why did he keep on saying he had?" demanded Morgan.

"I—I don't know."

"Then tell me this, miss. When you first heard this morning that Mr. Kane was dead, you asked whether it was suicide. Why did you ask that?"

"I——"

"Truth, miss!"

"I've been worried about him," answered Marion.

"He's been threatening suicide, if you must know. And he's been acting queerly."

Lionel Pell intervened. Lionel's way of speaking, which sometimes made him as unintelligible as a gramophone running down, now became almost clear. His long legs were outthrust; and his usual expression of supreme indifference was now replaced by one almost helpful. He sat back, long of nose and jaw, and laid down his pronouncement.

"The word, I believe, is 'childish,' " he decided. "The poor old boy—Norman, of course—has been playing with toys. Tell them about the cardboard soldiers, Marion. And the air-rifle."

Marion gave him an almost malevolent look.

"There's nothing very funny or childish about the air-rifle. It's a powerful one, hardly a toy at all. You've used it yourself. But I admit I don't understand about the soldiers.

"You see," she appealed to Morgan, "only the night before last my uncle came home with a huge box of cardboard soldiers. He bought them in Cardiff. They were gaudily painted, each of them five or six inches high. In the bottom was a wooden cannon, painted yellow, that fired a hard rubber ball. My uncle went back to his study and unwrapped them, and set them all up on the table."

At this point, Stacey noticed, the man called Colonel March stirred and glanced across with sudden interest. They all saw it; it brought a new atmosphere of tension. The superintendent looked at her with quick suspicion.

"Did he, Miss Kane? Did he seem to be—er—enjoying himself?"

"No," she replied quite seriously. "He looked ill. Once

he came out, for no reason at all, and begged my pardon."

"Miss Kane, do you mean your uncle was insane?"

Dr. Hastings interposed. "Norman Kane," he said, "was one of the sanest men I ever met."

"Now I will tell you something myself," said Superintendent Morgan. "He 'begged your pardon,' you say. You talk of suicide. I have heard of your Mr. Kane from my cousin, Morgan David. My cousin tells me that your Mr. Kane was not much better than a swindler. My cousin says his companies are crashing, and that he was going to be prosecuted. Is *that* a reason for suicide? I think it is."

"I know nothing of my uncle's private affairs," said Marion. And yet it was, Stacey felt, the thing she had been fearing. Marion wore a print frock, and she seemed less like a secretary than a nurse—a nurse at the bedside of a patient who she had determined should not die.

"Is that, I ask you, a reason for suicide?"

"It may be a reason for suicide," snapped Dr. Hastings. "But it won't explain how a man could run himself through the back at an angle his hand couldn't possibly reach—and in full sight of three witnesses as well."

"Murder or suicide, it is still impossible!"

"And yet the man is dead."

"One moment," said Colonel March.

It was an easy, comfortable voice, and it soothed tempers frayed by rain and fear. His presence was at once authoritative and comfortable, as though he invited them to a discussion rather than an argument; and his amiable eye moved round the group.

"It's not my place to butt in," he apologized, "but there are one or two things here that are rather in my line.

Do you mind, Superintendent, if I ask a question or two?"

"Glad," said Morgan fervently. "This gentleman," he explained, throwing out his chest, "is the head of D3 Department at Scotland Yard. He is down here —"

"——on not a very exciting errand," said Colonel March sadly. "A matter of a curious thief who steals only green candlesticks, and therefore comes under the head of our special investigation department. Excuse me: Miss Kane, two days before he died your uncle bought a box of cardboard soldiers. Will you get me that box of soldiers now?"

Without a word Marion got up and went into the cottage. Dr. Hastings looked up suddenly, as though on the defensive.

"We have also heard," Colonel March continued presently, "that he bought an air-rifle. I think you used that air-rifle, Mr. Pell?"

Lionel sat up. With the superintendent he had been friendly and helpful. With Colonel March he had adopted his usual indifference, the air of ease and right with which he (at twenty-three) had called Kane 'Norman' and conferred a favour by accepting loans.

"I *have* used it," he said. "It was not my property. Are you under the impression that our late good host was killed by being shot with one of those microscopic pellets out of a toy air-rifle? Or, for that matter, by a little rubber ball out of a toy cannon?"

"Where was the air-rifle kept?"

You could not shake Lionel's placidity.

"I believe I kept it in my room. Until last night, that is. Then I lent it to Marion. Hadn't you better ask her?"

Marion returned in a few moments, with a large and

bright-coloured box, which she handed to Colonel March. She seemed to feel that her name had been mentioned; for she looked quickly between Lionel and Bill Stacey. Colonel March opened the box, sniffing at his pipe.

"And yet," he said, with a sharpness which made Stacey uneasy, "the rubber ball is gone. Where, I wonder, is the air-rifle now? You borrowed it, Miss Kane?"

"Look here——" interrupted Dr. Hastings, with an oddly strained expression. He got up from his chair and sat down again.

"Yes, I borrowed it," Marion answered. "Why? Didn't I tell you? I took it out with me when I went to swim this morning, at the other side of the cottage. I shot a few meat-tins and things, and then put it down. When I came back to this side of the beach I must have forgotten it."

She stared at them, her eyes widening.

"I'm afraid it'll be ruined, in all this rain. I'm sorry. But what of it? Is it important?"

"Miss Kane," said Colonel March, "do you usually go out for a swim as early in the morning as that?"

"No. Never. Only I was horribly worried about my uncle. I couldn't sleep."

"You were fond of him?"

"Very fond of him," said Marion simply. "He had been very good to me."

Colonel March's expression seemed to darken and withdraw. It was as expressionless as his ancient cap or his ancient pipe; and he said nothing. But he closed the box of soldiers with great care, and beckoned the superintendent to one side. They had not long to wait for the result.

Late that afternoon a body was washed up on the shore

two miles below Barry Island. And Marion Kane was detained for questioning at the police-station, as a prelude to formal detention on a charge of murder.

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Stacey spent one of the worst nights of his life. He told himself that he must keep calm; that he must resist the impulse to telephone wildly for solicitors, invade the police station, and generally make a nuisance of himself. He realized, wryly, that he was not a strong, silent man like Dr. Hastings. In difficulties he wanted to do something about them, if only to adopt the dubious course of hitting somebody in the eye.

Things would be all right, he assured himself. Kane's own solicitor was coming from London, and the police were fair. But this very feeling that the police were fair disturbed him worst of all. After a sleepless night at the cottage he dozed off at dawn, and came downstairs at ten o'clock. Lionel Pell was coming up the verandah steps with a newspaper. It was still raining, and so dark that Dr. Hastings had lighted the oil-lamps in the living-room.

"Here's their case," said Lionel, holding up the newspaper. "Our superintendent has been talking indiscreetly. It's plastered all over the world."

"Their case? Their case against——?"

Stacey had to admit that his opinion of Lionel had changed. Lionel had no affectations now; under press of trouble he was only lanky and awkward and human.

"Well, they don't mention her name, of course. She's not officially under arrest. It's very carefully worded. But they appear to have found that air-rifle buried in the sand at the top of the beach under the bank. They found

it at the exact place where Marion says she was sitting when old Norman fell, and in an almost direct line with the Lion's Paw."

Against the lamplight from one of the living-room windows appeared Dr. Hastings's head. It was only a silhouette with wiry cropped hair, but they saw his knuckles bunch on the window-sill.

"I don't know anything about it," Lionel urged hastily. "I was in bed and asleep when it happened. But you recall, Bill, that until you came well out on the beach yesterday morning you couldn't see Marion at all. You were in the little lane. Dr. Hastings couldn't see her either. He was on the verandah here, and this cottage is set well back behind the line of the bank.

"If Norman were shot in the back, particularly with a weapon like that, he wouldn't feel it the moment he was hit. People don't, they say. He would hear a hail from Bill Stacey, and turn round. Then he would fall forward with the weapon in his heart——"

From the window Hastings uttered a kind of growl.

"The weapon?" he said. "As a matter of academic interest, will you tell me just what an air-rifle has to do with this, anyhow?"

"Oh, come! You won't be able to dodge responsibility like that, Doctor," said Lionel, who always dodged responsibility.

"Dodge——?"

"Yes. It's your fault. You were the one who suggested that the wound was made by a point and shaft like an old-fashioned hatpin?"

"Well?"

"Those air-rifles, you know; they're pretty powerful.

Hardly like a toy at all. But sometimes the lead pellets stick in the barrel and clog it. So as a rule the makers give you a very thin, light rod to clean the barrel with. If you cut off about three-quarters of the rod, and sharpen the other end to a needle-point, you would have a short missile that could be fired with very damaging force in the ordinary way."

There was a silence, except for the noise of sea and rain. Stacey walked to the end of the verandah.

"I've heard rot before," he said, as though making a measured decision. "But never in my life. . . . Do you realize that there's no air-rifle powerful enough to carry any kind of missile with enough force to kill at a distance of well over fifty yards?"

"Yes, I know," admitted Lionel. "But you see the trouble?"

"No, I don't."

"It's just plausible," said Lionel. "I don't believe it. It only worries me."

"I want my hat," said Dr. Hastings suddenly. "Where's my hat? This can't go on; I won't have it. I'm going down to the police station and tell them what really happened."

Outside the cottage there was a rustle of footsteps, stumbling footsteps in the gloom. It was so dark that they could barely see the two persons who came up the steps, but Dr. Hastings picked up a lamp inside the window and held it so that the light fell on Colonel March and Marion Kane.

Colonel March was wheezing a little, but as bland as ever. Marion's expression could not be read. There was relief in it, and disillusionment, and even peace; despite the signs of recent emotion, she was smiling.

"I should like a cigarette, please, Bill," she said. Then she took his arm. "Thank heavens," she added, "for an ordinary decent human being."

"The superintendent and I," said Colonel March, "have come to apologize. Of course, we did what we did entirely with Miss Kane's consent. We have concocted a fiction and kept on the lee side of libel. We have set a trap and heard it snap. We have given you all, I fear, a bad night. But it was the only way we could bring the corpse back to tell his own story. . . . You had better come up now, Mr. Kane."

It was a very muddy, shamfaced, and glowering corpse who walked up the steps behind Superintendent Morgan. Norman Kane, whose heart had stopped beating more than twenty-four hours ago, was now very much alive; and looked as though he wished he weren't.

Norman Kane's grey-haired dignity did not sustain him. He seemed undecided whether or not to hide behind Superintendent Morgan. For a moment he stood opening and shutting his hands. Then he caught sight of Dr. Hastings standing in the window, holding up the lamp.

"You traitor," he roared, and flung himself at the doctor.

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"He was dead," insisted Stacey. "His heart had stopped; I'll swear to that. How did he manage it?"

On a clear, cool morning after the rain, Marion, Stacey, and Colonel March stood on the beach looking at a new tide. Colonel March frowned.

"You had better hear the story," he said. "Kane was wrong in nearly everything; he was wrong in the way he flared out against Dr. Hastings. Hastings is his friend, and

only tried to help him when his pig-headed piece of deception would have been discovered in two minutes.

"You will already have guessed the fact which Miss Kane feared: Norman Kane was heading for a bad financial smash. It might not necessarily mean prison, but it would mean ruin and penury. Kane did not like such embarrassments. So he planned to stage a fake death and disappear, with a good sum laid by. Other financiers have been known to do it, you know," Colonel March added dryly.

Marion shied a pebble at the water and said nothing.

"He was going to 'die' and have his body washed out to sea never to be found," the colonel went on. "But he did not want either the stigma of suicide or the prying investigation of a murder. So, with the assistance of Dr. Hastings, he arranged to die of heart failure on the Lion's Paw. There had to be an independent witness there to swear to his death: you, Mr. Stacey. You were summoned for that purpose. Hastings had to be there to corroborate you. Then Hastings would shepherd you to the cottage, many hundred yards away, as the tide rose. Kane, a supremely powerful swimmer, could let himself into the water, swim out and round to the headland, and disappear.

"So for a long time he gabbled everywhere about his weak heart. But he would not listen to Hastings, who told him it was very risky. Miss Kane knew that his heart was not weak. Even the village doctor knew it. If Kane, therefore, suddenly dropped dead of a complaint he did not have, there would be a strong suspicion of fraud at the start. It was altogether a foolish plan. Even so it might have gone through if, on the very morning chosen for the

'death' Miss Kane had not decided to get up for an early swim.

"She was not accustomed to getting up early, as she told us. Norman Kane and Dr. Hastings thought they would have the whole beach to themselves at that hour—except for their special witness: a young man of a very unsuspecting nature."

Stacey looked at him gloomily.

"For 'unsuspecting,' " he said, "read 'imbecile.' Very well; but I was in full command of what faculties I have, Colonel. I know when a man is dead. And I tell you his heart had stopped."

"I beg your pardon," beamed Colonel March. "His heart had not stopped. But his pulse had stopped."

"His pulse?"

"You will recall how he was lying. Flat on his face, with his right hand doubled under him, but his left hand stretched out invitingly. He was also lying wedged in a kind of trough; and you know his enormous weight. To move him and get at his heart would be difficult and awkward. You would never try to do it, with that limp hand stretched out towards you. You would automatically feel the pulse at his wrist. And there was no pulse."

"But how the dickens can you stop a pulse? It's the same as a heart."

"You stop it," said Colonel March, "by means of a small, hard, rubber ball, such as the little one supplied with the toy cannon in the box of soldiers. It is a good trick, which was exhibited before a group of doctors in London some time ago—and it worked. At the same time it is so simple that I suggest you try it for yourself. Kane, of course, got it from Dr. Hastings. The small rubber ball

is placed under the armpit. The arm is pressed hard against the side; the flow of blood is cut off; and the man is 'dead.' Kane lay with his upper arm against his side, but with his lower arm from elbow to wrist extended for your inspection. That is all.

"Even so, the whole plan almost crashed, because Miss Kane appeared on the scene. You, Mr. Stacey, had found the body and announced death from heart failure. But Hastings knew that this would never do. Miss Kane strongly suspected that the weak heart was a sham.

"If the body had already been swept out to sea, if she had come on the scene only afterwards, she might have wavered. She might have been uncertain. She might have thought it was suicide, which they tried to conceal from her under a mask of heart failure. But there was the body. If something were not done quickly, she would have insisted on examining it. And it would never do for her to find a living man."

Marion nodded. She was still shaken from the after-effect of a somewhat bitter hoax, but she thrust out her chin.

"I certainly should have!" she said. "Only the doctor——"

"Diverted your attention. Exactly. He is an ingenious fellow, Hastings; and no wonder he was upset that morning. He diverted it in the only possible way, with a sudden clap of violence and murder. He drew you hastily back to the beach, so that Kane should not overhear. He shocked you out of your wits, which made it easy for him to put ideas into your mind.

"Remember you never actually *saw* any trace of a wound or a weapon. All you saw was a very minute tear

in the back of the dressing-gown, where it had been skagged on a nail.

“That tear (he admits) put the idea into his mind while he was making his ‘examination.’ To account for such a very small puncture, and such a complete absence of blood, he had to think of some weapon corresponding to that description; so he postulated something like an old-fashioned hatpin. He could have said it was suicide, of course. But he knew that a man could neither stab himself in the back at that angle, in the presence of witnesses, nor press such a weapon so far into the flesh as to be invisible. Whereas it was just possible that a thin blade might have been projected or fired by a murderer. It was altogether too possible. Dr. Hastings had acted wildly and unwisely on the spur of the moment, to prevent the discovery of his friend’s hoax. But he must have grown somewhat ill when he saw the case we spun out of a completely harmless air-rifle.”

Colonel March smiled apologetically.

“It was a very weak case, of course,” he said, “but we had to bring the corpse back. We had to have something—suggestive, but non-committal and non-libellous—to stare at Kane from the Welsh newspapers. It had to be done before he got away to the Continent, or we might never have caught him. The discovery of a drowned body, washed up at Barry, was very helpful; it aided the illusion with which we might snare Kane. The matter was suggested to Miss Kane, who agreed . . .”

“Agreed?” cried Marion. “Don’t you see I had to know whether . . . I have looked up to him all my life. I had to know whether he would cut and run just the same if he thought I might be hanged for his murder.”

"Which he did not do," said Colonel March. "Mr. Norman Kane, I think, has had a refreshing shock which will do him no harm. I should like to have seen him when he crept into town last night; when he found that he was not dead of heart failure and washed out to sea, but that his murdered body has been found and his niece was accused of having killed him. No wonder he burst out at Hastings. But what did he do? He must have realized, Miss Kane, that this charge against you would sooner or later be shown as nonsense; and yet he came back. It was a decent thing to do, as decent as the thing you did yourself. I think it likely that, if he faces his difficulties now, he will save himself as he thought he was saving you."

The Other Hangman

“**W**HY do they electrocute 'em instead of hanging 'em in Pennsylvania? What” (said my old friend, Judge Murchison, dexterously hooking the spittoon closer with his foot) “do they teach you youngsters in these new-fangled law schools, anyway? That, son, *was* a murder case. It turned the Supreme Court’s whiskers grey to find a final ruling, and for thirty years it’s been argued about by lawyers in the back room of every saloon from here to the Pacific coast. It happened right here in this county when they hanged Fred Joliffe for the murder of Randall Fraser.

“It was in '92 or '93; anyway, it was the year they put the first telephone in the court-house, and you could talk as far as Pittsburg except when the wires blew down. Considering it was the county seat, we were mighty proud of our town (population 3,500). The hustlers were always bragging about how thriving and growing our town was, and we had just got to the point of enthusiasm where every ten years we were certain the census-taker must have forgotten half our population. Old Mark Sturgis, who owned the *Bugle Gazette* then, carried on something awful in an editorial when they printed in the almanac that we had a population of only 3,265. We were all pretty riled about it, naturally.

“We were proud of plenty of other things, too. We had good reason to brag about the McClellan House, which

was the finest hotel in the county; and I mind when you could get room and board, with apple pie for breakfast every morning, for two dollars a week. We were proud of our old county families, that came over the mountains when Braddock's army was scalped by the Indians in seventeen fifty-five, and settled down in log huts to dry their wounds. But most of all we were proud of our legal batteries.

"Son, it was a grand assembly! Mind, I won't say that all of 'em were long on knowledge of the Statute Books; but they knew their *Blackstone* and their *Greenleaf on Evidence*, and they were powerful speakers. And there were some—the top-notchers—full of graces and book-knowledge and dignity, who were hell on the exact letter of the law. Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, all of us, who loved a good debate and a bottle o' whisky. There was Charley Connell, a Harvard graduate and the district attorney, who had fine white hands, and wore a fine high collar, and made such pathetic addresses to the jury that people flocked for miles around to hear him; though he generally lost his cases. There was Judge Hunt, who prided himself on his resemblance to Abe Lincoln, and in consequence always wore a frock coat and an elegant plug hat. Why, there was your own grandfather, who had over two hundred books in his library, and people used to go up nights to borrow volumes of the encyclopædia.

"You know the big stone court-house at the top of the street, with the flowers round it, and the jail adjoining? People went there as they'd go to a picture-show nowadays; it was a lot better, too. Well, from there it was only two minutes' walk across the meadow to Jim Riley's saloon. All the cronies gathered there—in the back room,

of course, where Jim had an elegant brass spittoon and a picture of George Washington on the wall to make it dignified. You could see the footpath worn across the grass until they built over that meadow. Besides the usual crowd, there was Bob Moran, the sheriff, a fine, strapping big fellow, but very nervous about doing his duty strictly. And there was poor old Nabors, a big, quiet, reddish-eyed fellow, who'd been a doctor before he took to drink. He was always broke, and he had two daughters — one of 'em consumptive — and Jim Riley pitied him so much that he gave him all he wanted to drink for nothing. Those were fine, happy days, with a power of eloquence and theorizing and solving the problems of the nation in that back room, until our wives came to fetch us home.

“Then Randall Fraser was murdered, and there was hell to pay.

“Now if it had been anybody else but Fred Joliffe who killed him, naturally we wouldn't have convicted. You can't do it, son, not in a little community. It's all very well to talk about the power and grandeur of justice, and sounds fine in a speech. But here's somebody you've seen walking the streets about his business every day for years; and you know when his kids were born, and saw him crying when one of 'em died; and you remember how he loaned you ten dollars when you needed it. . . . Well, you can't take that person out in the cold light of day and string him up by the neck until he's dead. You'd always be seeing the look on his face afterwards. And you'd find excuses for him no matter what he did.

“But with Fred Joliffe it was different. Fred Joliffe was the worst and nastiest customer we ever had, with the possible exception of Randall Fraser himself. Ever seen a

copperhead curled up on a flat stone? And a copperhead's worse than a rattlesnake—that won't strike unless you step on it, and gives warning before it does. Fred Joliffe had the same brownish colour and sliding movements. You always remembered his pale little eye and his nasty grin. When he drove his cart through town—he had some sort of rag-and-bone business, you understand—you'd see him sitting up there, a skinny little man in a brown coat, peeping round the side of his nose to find something for gossip. And grinning.

“It wasn't merely the things he said about people behind their backs. Or to their faces, for that matter, because he relied on the fact that he was too small to be thrashed. He was a slick customer. It was believed that he wrote those anonymous letters that caused . . . but never mind that. Anyhow, I can tell you his little smirk *did* drive Will Farmer crazy one time, and Will *did* beat him within an inch of his life. Will's livery stable was burnt down one night about a month later, with eleven horses inside, but nothing could ever be proved. He was too smart for us.

“That brings me to Fred Joliffe's only companion—I don't mean friend. Randall Fraser had a harness-and-saddle store in Market Street, a dusty place with a big dummy horse in the window. I reckon the only thing in the world Randall liked was that dummy horse, which was a dappled mare with vicious-looking glass eyes. He used to keep its mane combed. Randall was a big man with a fine moustache, a horseshoe pin in his tie, and sporty checked clothes. He was buttery polite, and mean as sin. He thought a dirty trick or a swindle was the funniest joke he ever heard. But the women liked him—a

lot of them, it's no denying, sneaked in at the back door of that harness store. Randall itched to tell it at the barber shop, to show what fools they were and how virile he was; but he had to be careful. He and Fred Joliffe did a lot of drinking together.

"Then the news came. It was in October, I think, and I heard it in the morning, when I was putting on my hat to go down to the office. Old Withers was the town constable then. He got up early in the morning, although there was no need for it; and, when he was going down Market Street in the mist about five o'clock, he saw the gas still burning in the back room of Randall's store. The front door was wide open. Withers went in and found Randall lying on a pile of harness in his shirt-sleeves, and his forehead and face bashed in with a wedging-mallet. There wasn't much left of the face, but you could recognize him by his moustache and his horseshoe pin.

"I was in my office when somebody yelled up from the street that they had found Fred Joliffe drunk and asleep in the flour-mill, with blood on his hands and an empty bottle of Randall Fraser's whisky in his pocket. He was still in bad shape, and couldn't walk or understand what was going on, when the sheriff—that was Bob Moran I told you about—came to take him to the lock-up. Bob had to drive him in his own rag-and-bone cart. I saw them drive up Market Street in the rain, Fred lying in the back of the cart all white with flour, and rolling and cursing. People were very quiet. They were pleased, but they couldn't show it.

"That is, all except Will Farmer, who had owned the livery stable that was burnt down.

“ ‘Now they’ll hang him,’ says Will. ‘Now, by God they’ll hang him.’ ”

“It’s a funny thing, son: I didn’t realize the force of that until I heard Judge Hunt pronounce sentence after the trial. They appointed me to defend him, because I was a young man without any particular practice, and somebody had to do it. The evidence was all over town before I got a chance to speak with Fred. You could see he was done for. A scissors-grinder who lived across the street (I forget his name now) had seen Fred go into Randall’s place about eleven o’clock. An old couple who lived up over the store had heard ’em drinking and yelling downstairs; at near on midnight they’d heard a noise like a fight and a fall; but they knew better than to interfere. Finally, a couple of farmers driving home from town at midnight had seen Fred stumble out of the front door, slapping his clothes and wiping his hands on his coat like a man with delirium tremens.

“I went to see Fred at the jail. He was sober, although he jerked a good deal. Those pale watery eyes of his were as poisonous as ever. I can still see him sitting on the bunk in his cell, sucking a brown-paper cigarette, wriggling his neck, and jeering at me. He wouldn’t tell me anything, because he said I would go and tell the judge if he did.

“ ‘Hang *me?*’ he says, and wrinkled his nose and jeered again. ‘Hang *me?* Don’t you worry about that, mister. Them so-and-so’s will never hang me. They’re too much afraid of me, them so-and-so’s are. Eh, mister?’ ”

“And the fool couldn’t get it through his head right up until the sentence. He strutted away in court; making smart remarks, and threatening to tell what he knew

about people, and calling the judge by his first name. He wore a dew dickey shirt-front he bought to look spruce in.

"I was surprised how quietly everybody took it. The people who came to the trial didn't whisper or shove; they just sat still as death, and looked at him. All you could hear was a kind of breathing. It's funny about a courtroom, son: it has it's own particular smell, which won't bother you unless you get to thinking about what it means, but you notice worn places and cracks in the walls more than you would anywhere else. You would hear Charley Connell's voice for the prosecution, a little thin sound in a big room, and Charley's footsteps creaking. You would hear a cough in the audience, or a woman's dress rustle, or the gas-jets whistling. It was dark in the rainy season, so they lit the gas-jets by two o'clock in the afternoon.

"The only defence I could make was that Fred had been too drunk to be responsible, and remembered nothing of that night (which he admitted was true). But, in addition to being no defence in law, it was a terrible frost besides. My own voice sounded wrong. I remember that six of the jury had whiskers, and six hadn't; and Judge Hunt, up on the bench with the flag draped on the wall behind his head, looked more like Abe Lincoln than ever. Even Fred Joliffe began to notice. He kept twitching round to look at people, a little uneasy-like. Once he stuck out his neck at the jury and screeched: 'Say something, can'tcha? Do something, can'tcha?'

"They did.

"When the foreman of the jury said: 'Guilty of murder in the first degree,' there was just a little noise from those people. Not a cheer, or anything like that. It hissed out

all together, only once, like breath released, but it was terrible to hear. It didn't hit Fred until Judge Hunt was half-way through pronouncing sentence. Fred stood looking round with a wild, half-witted expression until he heard Judge Hunt say: '*And may God have mercy on your soul.*' Then he burst out, kind of pleading and kidding as though this was carrying the joke too far. He said: 'Listen, now, you don't *mean* that, do you? You can't fool me. You're only Jerry Hunt; I know who you are. You can't do that to me.' All of a sudden he began pounding the table and screaming: 'You ain't really agoing to hang me, are you?'

"But we were.

"The date of execution was fixed for the twelfth of November. The order was all signed. '. . . within the precincts of the said county jail, between the hours of eight and nine a.m., the said Frederick Joliffe shall be hanged by the neck until he is dead; an executioner to be commissioned by the sheriff for this purpose, and the sentence to be carried out in the presence of a qualified medical practitioner; the body to be interred . . .' And the rest of it. Everybody was nervous. There hadn't been a hanging since any of that crowd had been in office, and nobody knew how to go about it exactly. Old Doc Macdonald, the coroner, was to be there; and of course they got hold of Reverend Phelps the preacher; and Bob Moran's wife was going to cook pancakes and sausage for the last breakfast. Maybe you think that's fool talk. But think for a minute of taking somebody you've known all your life, and binding his arms one cold morning, and walking him out in your own backyard to crack his neck on a rope -all religious and legal, with not a soul to

interfere. Then you begin to get scared of the powers of life and death, and the thin partition between.

"Bob Moran was scared white for fear things wouldn't go off properly. He had appointed big, slow-moving, tipsy Ed Nabors as hangman. This was partly because Ed Nabors needed the fifty dollars that was the fee, and partly because Bob had a vague idea that an ex-medical man would be better able to manage an execution. Ed had sworn to keep sober; Bob Moran said he wouldn't get a dime unless he *was* sober; but you couldn't always tell.

"Nabors seemed in earnest. He had studied up the matter of scientific hanging in an old book he borrowed from your grandfather, and he and the carpenter had knocked together a big, shaky-looking contraption in the jail yard. It worked all right in practice, with sacks of meal; the trap went down with a boom that brought your heart up in your throat. But once they allowed for too much spring in the rope, and it tore a sack apart. Then old Doc Macdonald chipped in about that fellow John Lee, in England — and it nearly finished Bob Moran.

"That was late on the night before the execution. We were sitting round the lamp in Bob's office, trying to play stud poker. There were tops and skipping-ropes, all kinds of toys, all over that office. Bob let his kids play in there — which he shouldn't have done, because the door out of it led to a corridor of cells with Fred Joliffe in the last one. Of course the few other prisoners, disorderlies and chicken-thieves and the like, had been moved upstairs. Somebody had told Bob that the scent of an execution affects 'em like a cage of wild animals. Whoever it was, he was right. We could hear 'em shifting and stamping over our heads, and one old nigger singing hymns all night long.

"Well, it was raining hard on the tin roof; maybe that was what put Doc Macdonald in mind of it. Doc was a cynical old devil. When he saw that Bob couldn't sit still, and would throw in his hand without even looking at the buried card, Doc says:

" 'Yes, I hope it'll go off all right. But you want to be careful about that rain. Did you read about that fellow they tried to hang in England? and the rain had swelled the boards so's the trap wouldn't fall? They stuck him on it three times, but still it wouldn't work . . . '

"Ed Nabors slammed his hand down on the table. I reckon he felt bad enough as it was, because one of his daughters had run away and left him, and the other was dying of consumption. But he was twitchy and reddish about the eyes, he hadn't had a drink for two days, although there was a bottle on the table. He says:

" 'You shut up or I'll kill you. Damn you, Macdonald,' he says, and grabs the edge of the table. 'I tell you nothing *can* go wrong. I'll go out and test the thing again, if you'll let me put the rope round your neck.'

"And Bob Moran says: 'What do you want to talk like that for, anyway, Doc? Ain't it bad enough as it is?' he says. 'Now you've got me worrying about something else,' he says. 'I went down there a while ago to look at him, and he said the funniest thing I ever heard Fred Joliffe say. He's crazy. He giggled and said God wouldn't let them so-and-so's hang him. It was terrible, hearing Fred Joliffe talk like that. What time is it, somebody?'

"I was cold that night. I dozed off in a chair, hearing the rain, and that animal-cage snuffling upstairs. The nigger was singing that part of the hymn about while the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high.

"They woke me about half-past eight to say that Judge Hunt and all the witnesses were out in the jail yard, and they were ready to start the march. Then I realized that they were really going to hang him after all. I had to join behind the procession as I was sworn, but I didn't see Fred Joliffe's face and I didn't want to see it. They had given him a good wash, and a clean flannel shirt that they tucked under at the neck. He stumbled coming out of the cell, and started to go in the wrong direction; but Bob Moran and the constable each had him by one arm. It was a cold, dark, windy morning. His hands were tied behind.

"The preacher was saying something I couldn't catch; everything went off smoothly enough until they got half-way across the jail yard. It's a pretty big yard. I didn't look at the contraption in the middle, but at the witnesses standing over against the wall with their hats off; and I smelled the clean air after the rain, and looked up at the mountains where the sky was getting pink. But Fred Joliffe did look at it, and went down flat on his knees. They hauled him up again. I heard them keep on walking, and go up the steps, which were creaky.

"I didn't look at the contraption until I heard a thumping sound, and we all knew something was wrong.

"Fred Joliffe was not standing on the trap, nor was the bag pulled over his head, although his legs were strapped. He stood with his eyes closed and his face towards the pink sky. Ed Nabors was clinging with both hands to the rope, twirling round a little and stamping on the trap. It didn't budge. Just as I heard Ed crying something about the rain having swelled the boards, Judge Hunt ran past me to the foot of the contraption.

"Bob Moran started cursing pretty obscenely. 'Put him on and try it, anyway,' he says, and grabs Fred's arm. 'Stick that bag over his head and give the thing a chance.'

" 'In His name,' says the preacher pretty steadily, 'you'll not do it if I can help it.'

"Bob ran over like a crazy man and jumped on the trap with both feet. It was stuck fast. Then Bob turned round and pulled an Ivor-Johnson .45 out of his hip-pocket. Judge Hunt got in front of Fred, whose lips were moving a little.

" 'He'll have the law, and nothing but the law,' says Judge Hunt. 'Put that gun away, you lunatic, and take him back to the cell until you can make the thing work. Easy with him, now.'

"To this day I don't think Fred Joliffe had realized what happened. I believe he only had his belief confirmed that they never meant to hang him after all. When he found himself going down the steps again, he opened his eyes. His face looked shrunken and dazed-like, but all of a sudden it came to him in a blaze.

" 'I knew them so-and-so's would never hang me,' says he. His throat was so dry he couldn't spit at Judge Hunt, as he tried to do; but he marched straight and giggling across the yard. 'I knew them so-and-so's would never hang me,' he says.

"We all had to sit down a minute, and we had to give Ed Nabors a drink. Bob made him hurry up, although we didn't say much, and he was leaving to fix the trap again when the court-house janitor came bustling into Bob's office.

" 'Call,' says he, 'on the new machine over there. Telephone.'

“ ‘Lemme out of here!’ yells Bob. ‘I can’t listen to no telephone calls now. Come out and give us a hand.’

“ ‘But it’s from Harrisburg,’ says the janitor. ‘It’s from the Governor’s office. You got to go.’

“ ‘Stay here, Bob,’ says Judge Hunt. He beckons to me. ‘Stay here, and I’ll answer it,’ he says. We looked at each other in a queer way when we went across the Bridge of Sighs. The court-house clock was striking nine, and I could look down into the yard and see people hammering at the trap. After Judge Hunt had listened to that telephone call he had a hard time putting the receiver back on the hook.

“ ‘I always believed in Providence, in a way,’ says he, ‘but I never thought it was so personal-like. Fred Joliffe is innocent. We’re to call off this business,’ says he, ‘and wait for a messenger from the Governor. He’s got the evidence of a woman. . . . Anyway, we’ll hear it later.’

“Now, I’m not much of a hand at describing mental states, so I can’t tell you exactly what we felt then. Most of all was a fever and horror for fear they had already whisked Fred out and strung him up. But when we looked down into the yard from the Bridge of Sighs we saw Ed Nabors and the carpenter arguing over a cross-cut saw on the trap itself; and the blessed morning light coming up in a glory to show us we could knock the ugly contraption to pieces and burn it.

“The corridor downstairs was deserted. Judge Hunt had got his wind back, and, being one of those stern elocutionists who like to make complimentary remarks about God, he was going on something powerful. He sobered up when he saw that the door to Fred Joliffe’s cell was open.

“ ‘Even Joliffe,’ says the judge, ‘deserves to get this news first.’ ”

“But Fred never did get that news, unless his ghost was listening. I told you he was very small and light. His heels were a good eighteen inches off the floor as he hung by the neck from an iron peg in the wall of the cell. He was hanging from a noose made in a child’s skipping-rope; black-faced, dead already, with the whites of his eyes showing in slits, and his heels swinging over a kicked-away stool.

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“No, son, we didn’t think it was suicide for long. For a little while we were stunned, half crazy, naturally. It was like thinking about your troubles at three o’clock in the morning.

“But, you see, Fred’s hands were still tied behind him. There was a bump on the back of his head, from a hammer that lay beside the stool. Somebody had walked in there with the hammer concealed behind his back, had stunned Fred when he wasn’t looking, had run a slip-knot in that skipping-rope, and jerked him up a-flapping to strangle there. It was the creepiest part of the business, when we’d got that through our heads, and we began loudly to tell each other where we’d been during the confusion. Nobody had noticed much. I was scared green.

“When we gathered round the table in Bob’s office, Judge Hunt took hold of his nerve with both hands. He looked at Bob Moran, at Ed Nabors, at Doc Macdonald, and at me. One of us was the other hangman.

“ ‘This is a bad business, gentlemen,’ says he, clearing his throat a couple of times like a nervous orator before he

starts. 'What I want to know is, who under sanity would strangle a man when he thought we intended to do it, anyway, on a gallows?'

"Then Doc Macdonald turned nasty. 'Well,' says he, 'if it comes to that, you might inquire where that skipping-rope came from, to begin with.'

" 'I don't get you,' says Bob Moran, bewildered-like.

" 'Oh, don't you?' says Doc, and sticks out his whiskers. 'Well, then, who was so dead set on this execution going through as scheduled that he wanted to use a gun when the trap wouldn't drop?'

"Bob made a noise as though he'd been hit in the stomach. He stood looking at Doc for a minute, with his hands hanging down and then he went for him. He had Doc back across the table, banging his head on the edge, when people began to crowd into the room at the yells. Funny, too; the first one in was the jail carpenter, who was pretty sore at not being told that the hanging had been called off.

" 'What do you want to start fighting for?' he says, fretful-like. He was bigger than Bob, and had him off Doc with a couple of heaves. 'Why didn't you tell me what was going on? They say there ain't going to be any hanging. Is that right?'

"Judge Hunt nodded, and the carpenter—Barney Hicks, that's who it was; I remember now—Barney Hicks looked pretty peevish, and says:

" 'All right, all right, but you hadn't ought to fight all over the joint like that.' Then he looks at Ed Nabors. 'What I want is my hammer. Where's my hammer, Ed? I been looking all over the place for it. What did you do with it?'

"Ed Nabors sits up, pours himself four fingers of rye, and swallows it.

" 'Beg pardon, Barney,' says he in the coolest voice I ever heard. 'I must have left it in the cell,' he says, 'when I killed Fred Joliffe.'

" 'Talk about silences' It was like one of those silences when the magician at the Opera House fires a gun and six doves fly out of an empty box. I couldn't believe it. But I remember Ed Nabors sitting big in the corner by the barred window, in his shiny black coat and string tie. His hands were on his knees, and he was looking from one to the other of us, smiling a little. He looked as old as the prophets then; and he'd got enough liquor to keep the nerve from twitching beside his eye. So he just sat there, very quietly, shifting the plug of tobacco around in his cheek, and smiling.

" 'Judge,' he says in a reflective way, 'you got a call from the Governor at Harrisburg, didn't you? Uh-huh. I knew what it would be. A woman had come forward, hadn't she, to confess Fred Joliffe was innocent and she had killed Randall Fraser? Uh-huh. The woman was my daughter. Jessie couldn't face telling it here, you see. That was why she ran away from me and went to the Governor. She'd have kept quiet if you hadn't convicted Fred.'

" 'But why . . .' shouts the judge. '*Why . . .*'

" 'It was like this,' Ed goes on in that slow way of his. 'She'd been on pretty intimate terms with Randall Fraser, Jessie had. And both Randall and Fred were having a whooping lot of fun threatening to tell the whole town about it. She was pretty near crazy, I think. And, you see, on the night of the murder Fred Joliffe was too

drunk to remember anything that happened. He thought he *had* killed Randall, I suppose, when he woke up and found Randall dead and blood on his hands.

“ ‘It’s all got to come out now, I suppose,’ says he, nodding. ‘What did happen was that the three of ’em were in that back room, which Fred didn’t remember. He and Randall had a fight while they were baiting Jessie; Fred whacked him hard enough with that mallet to lay him out, but all the blood he got was from a big splash over Randall’s eye. Jessie. . . . Well, Jessie finished the job when Fred ran away, that’s all.’

“ ‘But, you damned fool,’ cries Bob Moran, and begins to pound the table, ‘why did you have to go and kill Fred when Jessie had confessed?’

“ ‘You fellows wouldn’t have convicted Jessie, would you?’ says Ed, blinking round at us. ‘No. But, if Fred had lived after her confession, you’d have *had* to, boys. That was how I figured it out. Once Fred learned what did happen, that he wasn’t guilty and she was, he’d never have let up until he’d carried that case to the Superior Court out of your hands. He’d have screamed all over the State until they either had to hang her or send her up for life. I couldn’t stand that. As I say, that was how I figured it out, although my brain’s not so clear these days. So,’ says he, nodding and leaning over to take aim at the cuspidor, ‘when I heard about that telephone call, I went into Fred’s cell and finished *my* job.’

“ ‘But don’t you understand,’ says Judge Hunt, in the way you’d reason with a lunatic, ‘that Bob Moran will have to arrest you for murder, and —’

“ ‘It was the peacefulness of Ed’s expression that scared

us then. He got up from his chair, and dusted his shiny black coat, and smiled at us.

“ ‘Oh, no,’ says he very clearly. ‘That’s what you don’t understand. You can’t do a single damned thing to me. You can’t even arrest me.’ ”

“ ‘He’s bughouse,’ says Bob Moran.

“ ‘Am I?’ says Ed affably. ‘Listen to me. I’ve committed what you might call a perfect murder, because I’ve done it legally . . . Judge, what time did you talk to the Governor’s office, and get the order for the execution to be called off? Be careful now.’ ”

“And I said, with the whole idea of the business suddenly hitting me:

“ ‘It was maybe five minutes past nine, wasn’t it, Judge? I remember the court-house clock striking when we were going over the Bridge of Sighs.’ ”

“ ‘I remember it too,’ says Ed Nabors. ‘And Doc Macdonald will tell you that Fred Joliffe was dead before ever that clock struck nine. I have in my pocket,’ says he, unbuttoning his coat, ‘a court order which authorizes me to kill Fred Joliffe, by means of hanging by the neck—which I did—between the hours of eight and nine in the morning—which I also did. And I did it in full legal style before the order was countermanded. Well?’ ”

“Judge Hunt took off his stovepipe hat and wiped his face with a bandana. We all looked at him.

“ ‘You can’t get away with this,’ says the judge, and grabs the sheriff’s orders off the table. ‘You can’t trifle with the law in that way. And you can’t execute sentence alone. Look here! “In the presence of a qualified medical practitioner.” What do you say to that?’ ”

“ ‘Well, I can produce my medical diploma,’ says Ed,

nodding again. 'I may be a booze-hister, and mighty unreliable, but they haven't struck me off the register yet. . . . You lawyers are hell on the wording of the law,' says he admiringly, 'and it's the wording that's done for you this time. Until you get the law altered with some fancy words, there's nothing in that document to say that the doctor and the hangman can't be the same person.'

"After a while Bob Moran turned round to the judge with a funny expression on his face. It might have been a grin.

" 'This ain't according to morals,' says he. 'A fine citizen like Fred shouldn't get murdered like that. It's awful. Something's got to be done about it. As you said yourself this morning, Judge, he ought to have the law and nothing but the law. Is Ed right, Judge?'

" 'Frankly, I don't know,' says Judge Hunt, wiping his face again. 'But, so far as I know, he is. What are you doing, Robert?'

" 'I'm writing him out a cheque for fifty dollars,' says Bob Moran, surprised-like. 'We got to have it all nice and legal, haven't we?' "

New Murders for Old

HARGREAVES did not speak until he had turned on two lamps. Even then he did not remove his overcoat. The room, though cold, was stuffy, and held a faintly sweet odour. Outside the Venetian blinds, which were not quite closed, you saw the restless, shifting presence of snow past street-lights. For the first time, Hargreaves hesitated.

"The—the object," he explained, indicating the bed, "was there. *He* came in by this door, here. Perhaps you understand a little better now?"

Hargreaves' companion nodded.

"No," said Hargreaves, and smiled. "I'm not trying to invoke illusions. On the contrary, I am trying to dispel them. Shall we go downstairs?"

It was a tall, heavy house, where no clocks ticked. But the treads of the stairs creaked and cracked sharply, even under their padding of carpet. At the back, in a kind of small study, a gas-fire had been lighted. Its hissing could be heard from a distance; it roared up blue, like solid blue flames, into the white fretwork of the heater; but it did little to dispel the chill of the room. Hargreaves motioned his companion to a chair at the other side of the fire.

"I want to tell you about it," he went on. "Don't think I'm trying to be——" his wrist hesitated over a word, as though over a chesspiece—"highbrow. Don't

think I'm trying to be highbrow if I tell it to you"—again his wrist hesitated "objectively. As though you knew nothing about it. As though you weren't concerned in it. It's the only way you will understand the problem he had to face."

Hargreaves was very intent when he said this. He was bending forward, looking up from under his eyebrows; his heavy overcoat flopped over the sides of his knees, and his gloved hands, seldom still, either made a slight gesture or pressed flat on his knees.

"Take Tony Marvell, to begin with," he argued. "A good fellow, whom everybody liked. Not a good business man, perhaps: too generous to be a good business man; but as conscientious as the very devil, and with so fine a mathematical brain that he got over the practical difficulties.

"Tony was Senior Wrangler at Cambridge, and intended to go on with his mathematics. But then his uncle died, so he had to take over the business. You know what the business was then: three luxury hotels, built, equipped and run by Old Jim, the uncle, in Old Jim's most flamboyant style: all going to rack and ruin.

"Everybody said it was madness for Tony to push his shoulder up against the business world. His brother—that's Stephen Marvell, the former surgeon—said Tony would only bring Old Jim's card-houses down on everybody and swamp them all with more debts. But you know what happened. At twenty-five, Tony took over the business. At twenty-seven, he had the hotels on a paying basis. At thirty, they were hotels to which everybody went as a matter of course: blazing their sky-signs, humming with efficiency, piling up profits which startled even Tony.

“And all because he sneered at the idea that there could be any such thing as overwork. He never let up. You can imagine that dogged expression of his: ‘Well, I don’t like this work, but let’s clean it up satisfactorily so that we can get on to more important things’—like his studies. He did it partly because he had promised Old Jim he would, and partly *because* (you see?) he thought the business so unimportant that he wanted to show how easy it was. But it wasn’t easy. No man could stand that pace. London, Brighton, Eastbourne; he knew everything there was to know about the Marvel Hotels, down to the price of a pillow-case and the cost of grease for the lifts. At the end of the fifth year he collapsed one morning in his office. His brother Stephen told him what he had to do.

“‘You’re getting out of this,’ Stephen said. ‘You’re going clear away. Round the world, anywhere; but for six or eight months at the shortest time. During that time, you’re not even so much as to think of your work. Is that clear?’

“Tony told me the story himself last night. He says that the whole thing might never have happened if he had not been forbidden to write to anybody while he was away.

“‘Not even so much as a postcard,’ snapped Stephen, ‘to anybody. If you do, it’ll be more business; and then God help you.’

“‘But Judith——’ Tony protested.

“‘Particularly to Judith,’ said Stephen. ‘If you insist on marrying your secretary, that’s your affair. But you don’t ruin your rest-cure by exchanging long letters about the hotels.’

“You can imagine Stephen’s over-aristocratic, thin-nosed face towering over him, dull with anger. You can

imagine Stephen in his black coat and striped trousers, standing up beside the polished desk of his office in Harley Street. Stephen Marvell (and, to a certain extent, Tony, too) had that over-bred air which Old Jim Marvell had always wanted and never achieved.

"Tony did not argue. He was willing enough, because he was tired. Even if he were forbidden to write to Judith, he could always think about her. In the middle of September, more than eight months ago, he sailed by the *Queen Anne* from Southampton. And on that night the terrors began."

Hargreaves paused. The gas-fire still hissed in the little, dim study. You would have known that this was a house in which death had occurred, and occurred recently, by the look on the face of Hargreaves' companion. He went on:

"The *Queen Anne* sailed at midnight. Tony saw her soaring up above the docks, as high as the sky. He saw the long decks, white and shiny like shoe-boxes, gleaming under skeins of lights; he saw the black dots of passengers moving along them; he heard the click rattle-rush of winches as great cranes swung over the crowd on the docks; and he felt the queer, pleasurable, restless feeling which stirs the nerves at the beginning of an ocean voyage.

"At first he was as excited as a schoolboy. Stephen Marvell and Judith Gates, Tony's fiancée, went down to Southampton with him. Afterwards he recalled talking to Judith; holding her arm, piloting her through the rubbery-smelling passages of the ship to show her how fine it was. They went to Tony's cabin, where his luggage had been piled together with a basket of fruit. Everybody agreed that it was a fine cabin.

"It was not until a few minutes before the 'all-ashore' gong that the first pang of loneliness struck him. Stephen and Judith had already gone ashore, for all of them disliked these awkward, last-minute leave-takings. They were standing on the dock, far below. By leaning over the rail of the ship he could just see them. Judith's face was tiny, remote and smiling; infinitely loved. She was waving to him. Round him surged the crowd; faces, hats, noise under naked lights, accentuating the break with home and the water that would widen between. Next he heard the gong begin to bang: hollow, quivering, pulsing to loudness over the cry: 'All ashore that's going ashore!'; and dying away into the ship. He did not want to go. There was still plenty of time. He could still gather up his luggage and get off.

"For a time he stood by the rail, with the breeze from Southampton Water in his face. Such a notion was foolish. He would stay. With a last wave to Judith and Stephen, he drew himself determinedly away. He would be sensible. He would go below and unpack his things. Feeling the unreality of that hollow night, he went down to his cabin on C Deck. And his luggage was not there! He stared round the stuffy cabin with its neat curtains at the portholes. There had been a trunk and two suit-cases, gaudily labelled, to say nothing of the basket of fruit. Now the cabin was empty.

"Tony ran upstairs again to the purser's office. The purser, a harassed man behind a kind of ticket-window desk, was just getting rid of a clamouring crowd. In the intervals of striking a hand-bell and calling orders, he caught Tony's eye.

" 'My luggage —' Tony said.

" 'That's all right, Mr. Marvell,' said the harassed official. 'It's being taken ashore. But you'd better hurry yourself.'

"Tony had here only a feeling of extreme stupidity. 'Taken ashore?' he said. 'But why? Who told you to send it ashore?'

" 'Why, *you* did,' said the purser, looking up suddenly from a sheet of names and figures.

"Tony only looked at him.

" 'You came here,' the purser went on, with sharply narrowing eyes, 'not ten minutes ago. You said you had decided not to take the trip, and asked for your luggage to be taken off. I told you that at this late date we could not, of course, refund the-----'

" 'Get it back!' said Tony. His own voice sounded wrong. 'I couldn't have told you that. Get it back!'

" 'Just as you like, sir,' said the purser, smiting on the bell, '*if* there's time.'

"Overhead the hoarse blast of the whistle, that mournfullest of all sounds at sea, beat out against Southampton Water. B Deck, between open doors, was cold and gusty.

"Now Tony Marvell had not the slightest recollection of having spoken to the purser before. That was what struck him between the eyes like a blow, and what, for the moment, almost drove him to run away from the *Queen Anne* before they should lift the gang-plank. It was the nightmare again. One of the worst features of his nervous breakdown had been the conviction, coming in flashes at night, that he was not real any longer; that his body and his inner self had moved apart, the first walking or talking in everyday life like an articulate dummy,

while the brain remained in another place. It was as though he were dead, and seeing his body move. Dead.

"To steady his wits, he tried to concentrate on familiar human things. Judith, for instance; he recalled Judith's hazel eyes, the soft line of her cheek as she turned her head, the paper cuffs she wore at the office. Judith, his fiancée, his secretary, who would take care of things while he was away; whom he loved, and who was so maddeningly close even now. But he must not think of Judith. Instead, he pictured his brother Stephen, and Johnny Cleaver, and any other friends who occurred to him. He even thought of Old Jim Marvell, who was dead. And so strong is the power of imaginative visualisation—at that moment, in the breezy lounge-room facing the purser's office, he thought he saw Old Jim looking at him round the corner of a potted palm.

"All this, you understand, went through Tony's mind in the brief second while he heard the ship's whistle hoot out over his head.

"He made some excuse to the purser, and went below. He was grateful for the chatter of noise, for the people passing up and down below decks. None of them paid any attention to him, but at least they were there. But, when he opened the door of his cabin, he stopped and stood very still in the doorway.

"The propellers had begun to churn. A throb, a heavy vibration, shook upwards through the ship; it made the tooth-glass tinkle in the rack, and sent a series of creaks through the bulkheads. The *Queen Anne* was moving. Tony Marvell took hold of the door as though that movement had been a lurch, and he stared at the bed across the cabin. On the white

bedspread, where it had not been before, lay an automatic pistol."

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The gas-fire had heated its asbestos pillars to glowing red. Again there was a brief silence in the little study of the house in St. John's Wood. Hargreaves Sir Charles Hargreaves, Assistant Commissioner of Police for the Criminal Investigation Department, leaned down and lowered the flame of the heater. Even the tone of his voice seemed to change when the gas ceased its loud hissing.

"Wait!" he said, lifting his hand. "I don't want you to get the wrong impression. Don't think that the fear, the slow approach of what was going to happen, pursued Tony all through his trip round the world. It didn't. That's the most curious part of the whole affair.

"Tony has told me that it was a brief, bad bout, lasting perhaps fifteen minutes in all, just before and just after the *Queen Anne* sailed. It was not alone the uncanny feeling that things had ceased to be real. It was a sensation of active malignancy—of hatred, of danger, of what you like—surrounding him and pressing on him. He could feel it like a weak current from a battery.

"But five minutes after the ship had headed out to open sea, every such notion fell away from him. It was as though he had emerged out of an evil fog. That hardly seems reasonable. Even supposing that there are evil emanations, or evil spirits, it is difficult to think that they are confined to one country; that their tentacles are broken by half a mile's distance; that they cannot cross water. Yet there it was. One moment he was standing

there with the automatic pistol in his hand, the noise of the engines beating in his ears and a horrible impulse joggling his elbow to put the muzzle of the pistol into his mouth and——

“Then—snap! Something broke: that is the only way he can describe it. He stood upright. He felt like a man coming out of a fever, shaken and sweating, but back from behind the curtain into the real world again. He gulped deep breaths. He went to the porthole and opened it. From that time on, he says, he began to get well.

“How the automatic had got into his cabin he did not know. He knew he must have brought it himself, in one of those blind flashes. But he could not remember. He stared at it with new eyes, and new feeling of the beauty and sweetness of life. He felt as though he had been reprieved from execution.

“You might have thought that he would have flung the pistol overboard in sheer fear of touching it. But he didn't. To him it was the part of a puzzle. He stared much at it: a Browning 38, of Belgian manufacture, fully loaded. After the first few days, when he did keep it locked away out of sight in his trunk, he pondered over it. It represented the one piece of evidence he could carry back home with him, the one tangible reality in a nightmare.

“At the New York Customs-shed it seemed to excite no surprise. He carried it overland with him—Cleveland, Chicago, Salt Lake City—to San Francisco, in a fog, and then down the kindled sea to Honolulu. At Yokohama they were going to take it away from him; only a huge bribe retrieved it. Afterwards he carried it on his person, and was never searched. As the broken bones of his nerves

knitted, as in the wash of the propellers, there was peace, it became a kind of mascot. It went with him through the blistering heat of the Indian Ocean, into the murky Red Sea, to the Mediterranean. To Port Said, to Cairo in early winter. To Naples and Marseilles and Gibraltar. It was tucked away in his hip-pocket on the bitter cold night, a little more than eight months after his departure, when Tony Marvell a healed man again landed back at Southampton in the *S.S. Chippenham Castle*.

"It was snowing that night, you remember? The boat-train roared through thickening snow. It was crowded, and the heat would not work.

"Tony knew that there could be nobody at Southampton to meet him. His itinerary had been laid out in advance, and he had stuck to the bitter letter of his instructions about not writing even so much as a postcard. But he had altered the itinerary, so as to take a ship that would get him home in time for Christmas; he would burst in on them a week early. For eight months he had lived in a void. In an hour or two he would be home. He would see Judith again.

"In the dimly-lighted compartment of the train, his fellow-passengers were not talkative. The long voyage had squeezed their conversation dry; they almost hated each other. Even the snow roused only a flicker of enthusiasm.

" 'Real old-fashioned Christmas!' said one.

" 'Hah!' said another appreciatively, scratching with his finger-nails at the frosted window.

" 'Damn cold, *I* call it,' snarled a third. 'Can't they ever make the heat work in these trains? I'm damn well going to make a complaint!'

"After that, with a sympathetic grunt or mutter, each retired behind his newspaper; a white, blank wall which rustled occasionally, and behind which they drank up news of home.

"In other words (Tony remembers that he thought then), he was in England again. He was home. For himself, he only pretended to read. He leaned back in his seat, listening vaguely to the clackety-roar of the wheels, and the long blast of the whistle that was torn behind as the train gathered speed.

"He knew exactly what he would do. It would be barely ten o'clock when they reached Waterloo. He would jump into a cab, and hurry home—to this house—for a wash and brush-up. Then he would pelt up to Judith's flat at Hampstead as hard as he could go. Yet this thought, which should have made him glow, left him curiously chilly round the heart. He fought the chill. He laughed at himself. Determinedly he opened the newspaper, distracting himself, turning from page to page, running his eye down each column. Then he stopped. Something familiar caught his eye, some familiar name. It was an obscure item on a middle page.

"He was reading in this paper the news of his own death. Just that.

" 'Mr. Anthony Dean Marvell, of Upper Avenue Road, St. John's Wood, and owner of Marvell Hotels, Ltd., was found shot dead last night in his bedroom at home. A bullet had penetrated up through the roof of the mouth into the brain, and a small-calibre automatic was in his hand. The body was found by Mrs. Reach, Mr. Marvell's housekeeper, who . . . '

"A suicide!

"And once again, as suddenly as it had left him aboard ship, the grasp fell on him, shutting him off from the real world into the unreal. The compartment, as I told you, was very dimly lighted. So it was perhaps natural that he could only dimly see a blank wall of upheld newspapers facing him; as though there were no fellow-passengers there, as though they had deserted him in a body, leaving only the screen of papers that joggled a little with the rush of the train.

"Yes, he was alone.

"He got up blindly, dragging open the door of the compartment to get out into the corridor. The confined space seemed to be choking him. Holding his own newspaper up high, so as to catch the light from the compartment, he read the item again.

"There could be no possibility of a mistake. The account was too detailed. It told all about him, his past and present . . .

" ' . . . His brother, Mr. Stephen Marvell, the eminent Harley Street surgeon, was hurriedly summoned. . . . His fiancée, Miss Judith Gates . . . It is understood that in September Mr. Marvell suffered a nervous breakdown, from which even a long rest had not effected a cure. . . . '

"Tony looked at the date of the newspaper, afraid of what he might see. But it was the date of that day: the twenty-third of December. From this account, it appeared that he had shot himself forty-eight hours before.

"And the gun was in his hip-pocket now.

"Tony folded up the newspaper. The train moved under his feet with a dancing sway, jerking above the click of the wheels; and another thin blast of the whistle went by. It reminded him of the whistle aboard the *Queen Anne*. He glanced along the dusky corridor. It was empty except for someone, whom he supposed to be another passenger, leaning elbows on the rail past the windows and staring out at the flying snow.

"He remembers nothing else until the train reached Waterloo. But something—an impression, a subconscious memory—registered in his mind about that passenger he had seen in the corridor. First it had to do with the shape of the person's shoulders. Then Tony realized that this was because the person was wearing a greatcoat with an old-fashioned brown fur collar. He was jumping blindly out of the train at Waterloo when he remembered that Old Jim Marvell always used to wear such a collar.

"After that he seemed to see it everywhere.

"When he hurried up to the guard's van to claim his trunk and suitcases, the luggage-ticket in his hand, he was in such a crowd that he could not move his arms. But he thought he felt brown fur press the back of his shoulders.

"A porter got him a taxi. It was a relief to see a London cab again, in a coughing London terminus, and hear the bump of the trunk as it went up under the strap, and friendly voices again. He gave the address to the driver, tipped the porter, and jumped inside. Even so, the porter seemed to be holding open the door of the taxi longer than was necessary.

" 'Close it, man!' Tony found himself shouting. 'Close it, quick!'

"‘Yessir,’ said the porter, jumping back. The door slammed. Afterwards, the porter stood and stared after the taxi. Tony, glancing out through the little back window, saw him still standing there.

"It was dark in the cab, and as close as though a photographer’s black hood had been drawn over him. Tony could see little. But he carefully felt with his hands all over the seat, all over the open space; and he found nothing."

At this point in the story, Hargreaves broke off for a moment or two. He had been speaking with difficulty; not as though he expected to be doubted, but as though the right words were hard to find. His gloved fingers opened and closed on his knee.

For the first time his companion—Miss Judith Gates — interrupted him. Judith spoke from the shadow on the other side of the gas-fire.

"Wait!" she said. "Please!"

"Yes?" said Hargreaves.

"This person who was following Tony." She spoke also with difficulty. "You aren’t telling me that it was—well, was——?"

"Was what?"

"Dead," said Judith.

"I don’t know who it was," answered Hargreaves, looking at her steadily. "Except that it seemed to be somebody with a fur collar on his coat. I’m telling you Tony’s story, which I believe."

Judith’s hand shaded her eyes. "All the same," she insisted, and her pleasant voice went high, "even supposing it was! I mean, even supposing it was the person you think. *He* of all people, living or dead, wouldn’t have

tried to put any evil influence round Tony. Old Jim loved Tony. He left Tony every penny he owned, and not a farthing to Stephen. He always told Tony he'd look after him."

"And so he did," said Hargreaves.

"But——"

"You see," Hargreaves told her slowly. "You still don't understand the source of the evil influence. Tony didn't, himself. All he knew was that he was bowling along in a dark taxi, through slippery, snowy streets; and whatever might be following him, good or bad, he couldn't endure it.

"Even so, everything might have ended well if the taxi-driver had been careful. But he wasn't. That was the first snowfall of the year, and the driver miscalculated. When they were only two hundred yards from Upper Avenue Road, he tried to take a turn too fast. Tony felt the helpless swing of the skid; he saw the glass partition tilt, and a black tree-trunk rush up, huge at them until it exploded against the outer windscreen. They landed upright against the tree, with a buckled wheel.

" 'I 'ad to swerve,' the driver was crying. 'I 'ad to! An old gent with a fur collar walked smack out in front of——'

"And so, you see, Tony had to walk home alone.

.

"He knew something was following him before he had taken half a dozen steps. Two hundred yards don't sound like a great distance. First right, first left, and you're home. But here it seemed to stretch out interminably, as such things do in dreams. He did not want to leave the

taxi-driver. The driver thought this was because Tony doubted his honesty about bringing the luggage on when the wheel was repaired. But it was not that.

"For the first part of the way, Tony walked rapidly. The other thing walked at an equal pace behind him. By the light of a street-lamp Tony could see the wet fur collar on the coat, but nothing else. Afterwards he increased his pace to what was almost a run; and, though no difference could be seen in the gait of what was behind him, it was still there. Unlike you, Tony didn't wonder whether it might be good or evil. These nice differences don't occur to you when you're dealing with something that may be dead. All he knew was that he mustn't let it *identify* itself with him or he was done for.

"Then it began to gain on him, and he ran.

"The pavement was black, the snow dirty grey. He saw the familiar turning, where front gardens were built up above the low, stone walls; he saw the street sign fastened to one of those corners, white lettering on black; and, in sudden blind panic, he plunged for the steps that led up to his home.

"The house was dark. He got the cold keys out of his pocket, but the key-ring slipped round in his fingers, like soap in bath-water, and fell on the tiled floor of the vestibule. He groped after it in the dark—just as the thing turned in at the gate. In fact, Tony heard the gate creak. He found the keys, found the lock by a miracle, and opened the door.

"But he was too late, because the other thing was already coming up the front steps. Tony says that at close range, against a street-lamp, the fur collar looked more wet and moth-eaten; that is all he can describe. He

was in a dark hall with the door open. Even familiar things had fled his wits and he could not remember the position of the light-switch.

"The other person walked in.

"In his hip-pocket, Tony remembered, he still had the weapon he had carried round the world. He fumbled under his overcoat to get the gun out of his pocket; but even that weak gesture was no good to him, for he dropped the gun on the carpet. Since the visitor was now within six feet of him, he did not stop. He bolted up the stairs.

"At the top of the stairs he risked a short glance down. The other thing had stopped. In faint bluish patches of light which came through the open front door, Tony could see that it was stooping down to pick up the automatic pistol from the carpet.

"Tony thinks now that he began to switch on lights in the upper hall. Also, he shouted something. He was standing before the door of his bedroom. He threw open this door, blundered in, and began to turn on more lamps. He had got two lamps lighted before he turned to look at the bed, which was occupied.

"The man on the bed did not, however, sit up at the coming of noise or lights. A sheet covered him from head to feet; and even under the outline of the sheet you could trace the line of the wasted, sunken features. Tony Marvell then did what was perhaps the most courageous act of his life. He had to know. He walked across and turned down the upper edge of the sheet, and looked down at his own face; a dead face, turned sightlessly up from the bed.

"Shock? Yes. But more terror? No. For this dead man

was real, he was flesh and blood—as Tony was flesh and blood. He looked exactly like Tony. But it was now no question of a real world and an unreal world; it was no question of going mad. This man was real; and that meant fraud and imposture.

“A voice from across the room said: ‘*So you’re alive!*’ And Tony turned round, to find his brother Stephen looking at him from the doorway.

“Stephen wore a red dressing-gown, hastily pulled round him, and his hair was tousled. His face was one of collapse.

“‘I didn’t mean to do it!’ Stephen was crying out at him. Even though Tony did not understand, he felt that the words were a confession of guilt; they were babbling words, words which made you pity the man who said them.

“‘I never really meant to have you killed aboard that ship,’ said Stephen. ‘It was all a joke. You know I wouldn’t have hurt you; you know that, don’t you? Listen——’

“Now Stephen (as I said) was standing in the doorway, clutching his dressing-gown round him. What made him look round towards the hall behind, quickly, Tony did not know. Perhaps he heard a sound behind him. Perhaps he saw something out of the corner of his eye. But Stephen did look round, and he began to scream.

“Tony saw no more, for the light in the hall went out. The fear was back on him again, and he could not move. For he saw a hand. It was only, so to speak, the flicker of a hand. This hand darted in from the darkness out in the hall; it caught hold of the knob on the bedroom door, and closed the door. It turned a key on the outside, locking

Tony into the room. It kept Stephen outside in the dark hall and Stephen was still screaming.

"A good thing, too, that Tony had been locked in the room. That saved trouble with the police afterwards.

"The rest of the testimony comes from Mrs. Reach, the housekeeper. Her room was next door to Stephen's bedroom, at the end of the upstairs hall. She was awakened by screams, by what seemed to be thrashing sounds, and the noise of hard breathing. These sounds passed her door towards Stephen's room.

"Just as she was getting out of her bed and putting on a dressing-gown, she heard Stephen's door close. Just as she went out into the hall, she heard, for the second time in forty-eight hours, the noise of a pistol-shot.

"Now, Mrs. Reach will testify in a coroner's court that nobody left, or could have left Stephen's room after the shot. She was looking at the door, though it was several minutes before she could screw up enough courage to open the door. When she did open it, all sounds had ceased. He had been shot through the right temple at close range; presumably by himself, since the weapon was discovered in a tangle of stained bed-clothing. There was nobody else in the room, and all the windows were locked on the inside. The only other thing Mrs. Reach noticed was an unpleasant, an intensely unpleasant smell of mildewed cloth and wet fur."

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Again Hargreaves paused. It seemed that he had come to the end of the story. An outsider might have thought, too, that he had emphasised these horrors too much, for

the girl across from him kept her hands pressed against her eyes. But Hargreaves knew his business.

"Well?" he said gently. "You see the explanation, don't you?"

Judith took her hands away from her eyes. "Explanation?"

"The natural explanation," repeated Hargreaves, spacing his words. "Tony Marvell is not going mad. He never had any brainstorms or 'blind flashes.' He only thought he had. The whole thing was a cruel and murderous fake, engineered by Stephen, and it went wrong. But if it had succeeded, Stephen Marvell would have committed a very nearly perfect murder."

The relief he saw flash across Judith's face, the sudden dazed catching at hope, went to Hargreaves' heart. But he did not show this.

"Let's go back eight months," he went on, "and take it from the beginning. Now, Tony is a very wealthy young man. The distinguished Stephen, on the other hand, was swamped with debts and always on the thin edge of bankruptcy. If Tony were to die, Stephen, the next of kin, would inherit the whole estate. So Stephen decided that Tony had to die.

"But Stephen, a medical man, knew the risks of murder. No matter how cleverly you plan it, there is always *some* suspicion; and Stephen was bound to be suspected. He was unwilling to risk those prying detectives, those awkward questions, those damning post-mortem reports—until, more than eight months ago, he suddenly saw how he could destroy Tony without the smallest suspicion attaching to himself.

"In St. Jude's Hospital, where he did some charity

work, Stephen had found a broken-down ex-schoolmaster named Rupert Hayes. Every man in this world, they say, has his exact double. Hayes was Tony's double to the slightest feature. He was, in fact, so uncannily like Tony that the very sight of him made Stephen flinch. Now, Hayes was dying of tuberculosis. He had, at most, not more than a year to live. He would be eager to listen to any scheme which would allow him to spend the rest of his life in luxury, and die of natural causes in a soft bed. To him Stephen explained the trick.

"Tony should be ordered off apparently—on a trip round the world. On the night he was to sail, Tony should be allowed to go aboard.

"Hayes should be waiting aboard that same ship, with a gun in his pocket. After Stephen or any other friends had left the ship conveniently early, Hayes should entice Tony up to the dark boat-deck. Then he was to shoot Tony through the head, and drop the body overboard.

"Haven't you ever realized that a giant ocean-liner, just before it leaves port, is the ideal place to commit a murder? Not a soul will remember you afterwards. The passengers notice nothing; they are too excited. The crew notice nothing; they are kept too busy. The confusion of the crowd is intense. And what happens to your victim after he goes overboard? He will be sucked under and presently caught by the terrible propellers, to make him unrecognizable. When a body is found—if it is found at all—it will be presumed to be some dock-roysterer. Certainly it will never be connected with the ocean-liner, because there will be nobody missing from the liner's passenger list.

"Missing from the passenger-list? Of course not!

Hayes, you see, was to go to the purser and order Tony's luggage to be sent ashore. He was to say he was cancelling the trip, and not going after all. After killing Tony he was then to walk ashore as——"

The girl uttered an exclamation.

Hargreaves nodded. "You see it now. He was to walk ashore *as Tony*. He was to say to his friends that he couldn't face the journey after all; and everybody would be happy. Why not? The real Tony was within an ace of doing just that.

"Then, Hayes, well coached, would simply settle down to play the part of Tony for the rest of his natural life. Mark that: his natural life; a year at most. He would be too ill to attend to the business, of course. He wouldn't even see you, his fiancée, too often. If ever he made any bad slips, that, of course, would be his bad nerves. He would be allowed to 'develop' lung trouble. At the end of a year, amid sorrowing friends . . .

"Stephen had planned brilliantly. 'Murder'? What do you mean, murder? Let the doctors examine as much as they like! Let the police ask what questions they like! Whatever steps are taken, Stephen Marvell is absolutely safe. For the poor devil in bed really has died a natural death.

"Only — well, it went wrong. Hayes wasn't cut out to be a murderer. I hadn't the favour of his acquaintance, but he must have been a decent sort. He promised to do this. But, when it came to the actual fact, he couldn't force himself to kill Tony: literally, physically couldn't. He threw away his pistol and ran. On the other hand, once off the ship, he couldn't confess to Stephen that Tony was still alive. He couldn't give up that year of sweet luxury,

with all Tony's money at his disposal to soothe his aching lungs. So he pretended to Stephen that he had done the job, and Stephen danced for joy. But Hayes, as the months went on, did not dance. He knew Tony wasn't dead. He knew there would be a reckoning soon. And he couldn't let it end like that. A week before he thought Tony was coming home, after writing a letter to the police to explain everything, Hayes shot himself rather than face exposure."

There was a silence. "That, I think," Hargreaves said quietly, "explains everything about Tony."

Judith Gates bit her lips. Her pretty face was working; and she could not control the twitching of her capable hands. For a moment she seemed to be praying.

"Thank God!" she murmured. "I was afraid——"

"Yes," said Hargreaves; "I know."

"But it still doesn't explain everything. It——"

Hargreaves stopped her.

"I said," he pointed out, "that it explains everything about Tony. That's all you need worry about. Tony is free. You are free. As for Stephen Marvell's death, it was suicide. That is the official record."

"But that's absurd!" cried Judith. "I didn't like Stephen; I always knew he hated Tony; but he wasn't one to kill himself, even if he were exposed. Don't you see, you haven't explained the one real horror? I must know. I mean, I must know if you think what I think about it. Who was the man with the brown fur collar? Who followed Tony home that night? Who stuck close by him, to keep the evil influences off him? Who was his guardian? Who shot Stephen in revenge?"

Sir Charles Hargreaves looked down at the sputtering

gas-fire. His face, inscrutable, was wrinkled in sharp lines from mouth to nostril. His brain held many secrets. He was ready to lock away this one, once he knew that they understood each other.

"You tell me," he said.

Persons or Things Unknown

“**A**FTER all,” said our host, “it’s Christmas. Why not let the skeleton out of the bag?”

“Or the cat out of the closet,” said the historian, who likes to be precise even about *clichés*. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” said our host. “I want to know whether it’s safe for anyone to sleep in that little room at the head of the stairs.”

He had just bought the place. This party was in the nature of a house-warming; and I had already decided privately that the place needed one. It was a long, damp, high-windowed house, hidden behind a hill in Sussex. The drawing-room, where a group of us had gathered round the fire after dinner, was much too long and much too draughty. It had fine panelling—a rich brown where the firelight was always finding new gleams—and a hundred little reflections trembled down its length, as in so many small gloomy mirrors. But it remained draughty.

Of course, we all liked the house. It had the most modern of lighting and heating arrangements, though the plumbing sent ghostly noises and clanks far down into its interior whenever you turned on a tap. But the smell of the past was in it; and you could not get over the idea that somebody was following you about. Now, at the host’s flat mention of a certain possibility, we all looked at our wives.

"But you never told us," said the historian's wife, rather shocked, "you never told us you had a ghost here!"

"I don't know that I have," replied our host quite seriously. "All I have is a bundle of evidence about something queer that once happened. It's all right; I haven't put anyone in that little room at the head of the stairs. So we can drop the discussion, if you'd rather."

"You know we can't," said the inspector: who, as a matter of strict fact, is an Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He smoked a large cigar, and contemplated ghosts with satisfaction. "This is exactly the time and place to hear about it. What is it?"

"It's rather in your line," our host told him slowly. Then he looked at the historian. "And in your line, too. It's a historical story. I suppose you'd call it a historical romance."

"I probably should. What is the date?"

"The date is the year sixteen hundred and sixty."

"That's Charles the Second, isn't it, Will?" demanded the historian's wife; she annoys him sometimes by asking these questions. "I'm terribly fond of them. I hope it has lots of big names in it. You know: Charles the Second and Buckingham and the rest of them. I remember, when I was a little girl, going to see" —she mentioned a great actor—"play David Garrick. I was looking forward to it. I expected to see the programme and the cast of characters positively bristling with people like Dr. Johnson and Goldsmith, and Burke and Gibbon and Reynolds, going in and out every minute. There wasn't a single one of them in it, and I felt swindled before the play had begun."

The trouble was that she spoke without conviction. The historian looked sceptically over his pince-nez.

"I warn you," he said, "if this is something you claim to have found in a drawer, in a crabbed old handwriting and all the rest of it, I'm going to be all over you professionally. Let me hear one anachronism——"

But he spoke without conviction, too. Our host was so serious that there was a slight, uneasy silence, in the group.

"No. I didn't find it in a drawer; the parson gave it to me. And the handwriting isn't particularly crabbed. I can't show it to you, because it's being typed, but it's a diary: a great, hefty mass of stuff. Most of it is rather dull, though I'm steeped in the seventeenth century, and I confess I enjoy it. The diary was begun in the summer of '60—just after the Restoration—and goes on to the end of '64. It was kept by Mr. Everard Poynter, who owned Manfred Manor (that's six or seven miles from here) when it was a farm.

"I know that fellow," he added, looking thoughtfully at the fire. "I know about him and his sciatica and his views on mutton and politics. I know why he went up to London to dance on Oliver Cromwell's grave, and I can guess who stole the two sacks of malt out of his brew-house while he was away. I see him as half a Hat; the old boy had a beaver hat he wore on his wedding day, and I'll bet he wore it to his death. It's out of all this that I got the details about people. The actual facts I got from the report of the coroner's inquest, which the parson lent me."

"Hold on!" said the Inspector, sitting up straight. "Did this fellow Poynter see the ghost and die?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. But he was one of the witnesses. He saw a man hacked to death, with thirteen stab-wounds in his body, from a hand that wasn't there and a weapon that didn't exist."

There was a silence.

"A murder?" asked the Inspector.

"A murder."

"Where?"

"In that little room at the head of the stairs. It used to be called the Ladies' Withdrawing Room."

Now, it is all very well to sit in your well-lighted flat in town and say we were hypnotized by an atmosphere. You can hear motor-cars crashing their gears, or curse somebody's wireless. You did not sit in that house, with a great wind rushing up off the downs, and a wall of darkness built up for three miles around you: knowing that at a certain hour you would have to retire to your room and put out the light, completing the wall.

"I regret to say," went on our host, "that there are no great names. These people were no more concerned with the Court of Charles the Second—with one exception—than we are concerned with the Court of George the Sixth. They lived in a little, busy, possibly ignorant world. They were fierce, fire-eating Royalists, most of them, who cut the Stuart arms over their chimney-pieces again and only made a gala trip to town to see the regicides executed in October of '60. Poynter's diary is crowded with them. Among others there is Squire Radlow, who owned this house then and was a great friend of Poynter. There was Squire Radlow's wife, Martha, and his daughter Mary.

"Mistress Mary Radlow was seventeen years old. She was not one of your fainting girls. Poynter—used to giving details—records that she was five feet tall, and thirty-two inches round the bust. 'Pretty and delicate,' Poynter says, with hazel eyes and a small mouth. But she

could spin flax against any woman in the county; she once drained a pint of wine at a draught, for a wager; and she took eager pleasure in any good spectacle, like a bear-baiting or a hanging. I don't say that flippantly, but as a plain matter of fact. She was also fond of fine clothes, and danced well.

"In the summer of '60 Mistress Mary was engaged to be married to Richard Oakley, of Rawndene. Nobody seems to have known much about Oakley. There are any number of references to him in the diary, but Poynter gives up trying to make him out. Oakley was older than the girl; of genial disposition, though he wore his hair like a Puritan; and a great reader of books. He had a good estate at Rawndene, which he managed well, but his candle burned late over his books; and he wandered abroad in all weathers, summer or frost, in as black a study as the Black Man.

"You might have thought that Mistress Mary would have preferred somebody livelier. But Oakley was good enough company, by all accounts, and he suited her exactly—they tell me that wives understand this.

"And here is where the trouble enters. At the Restoration, Oakley was looking a little white. Not that his loyalty was exactly suspect; but he had bought his estate under the Commonwealth. If sales made under the Commonwealth were now declared null and void by the new Government, it meant ruin for Oakley; and also, under the business-like standards of the time, it meant the end of his prospective marriage to Mistress Mary.

"Then Gerald Vanning appeared.

"Hoy, what a blaze he must have made! He was fresh and oiled from Versailles, from Cologne, from Bruges,

from Brussels, from Breda, from everywhere he had gone in the train of the formerly exiled king. Vanning was one of those 'confident young men' about whom we hear so much complaint from old-style Cavaliers in the early years of the Restoration. His family had been very powerful in Kent before the Civil Wars. Everybody knew he would be well rewarded, as he was.

"If this were a romance, I could now tell you how Mistress Mary fell in love with the handsome young Cavalier, and forgot about Oakley. But the truth seems to be that she never liked Vanning. Vanning disgusted Poynter by a habit of bowing and curvetting, with a superior smile, every time he made a remark. It is probable that Mistress Mary understood him no better than Poynter did.

"There is a description in the diary of a dinner Squire Radlow gave to welcome him here at this house. Vanning came over in a coach, despite the appalling state of the roads, with a dozen lackeys in attendance. This helped to impress the Squire, though nothing had as yet been settled on him by the new regime. Vanning already wore his hair long, whereas the others were just growing theirs. They must have looked odd and patchy, like men beginning to grow beards, and rustic enough to amuse him.

"But Mistress Mary was there. Vanning took one look at her, clapped his hand on the back of a chair, bowed, rolled up his eyes, and began to lay siege to her in the full-dress style of the French king taking a town. He slid *bons mots* on his tongue like sweetmeats; he hiccoughed; he strutted; he directed killing ogles. Squire Radlow and his wife were enraptured. They liked Oakley of Rawndene—

but it was possible that Oakley might be penniless in a month. Whereas Vanning was to be heaped with preferments, a matter of which he made no secret. Throughout this dinner Richard Oakley looked unhappy, and 'shifted his eyes.'

"When the men got drunk after dinner, Vanning spoke frankly to Squire Radlow. Oakley staggered out to get some air under the apple-trees; what between liquor and crowding misfortunes, he did not feel well. Together among the fumes, Vanning and Squire Radlow shouted friendship at each other, and wept. Vanning swore he would never wed anybody but Mistress Mary, not if his soul rotted deep in hell as Oliver's. The Squire was stern, but not too stern. 'Sir,' said the Squire, 'you abuse my hospitality; my daughter is pledged to the gentleman who has just left us; but it may be that we must speak of this presently.' Poynter, though he saw the justice of the argument, went home disturbed.

"Now, Gerald Vanning was not a fool. I have seen his portrait, painted a few years later when periwigs came into fashion. It is a shiny, shrewd, razorish kind of face. He had some genuine classical learning, and a smattering of scientific monkey-tricks, the new toy of the time. But, above all, he had foresight. In the first place, he was genuinely smitten with hazel eyes and other charms. In the second place, Mistress Mary Radlow was a catch. When awarding bounty to the faithful, doubtless the King and Sir Edward Hyde would not forget Vanning of Mallingsford; on the other hand, it was just possible they might.

"During the next three weeks it was almost taken for granted that Vanning should eventually become the

Squire's son-in-law. Nothing was said or done, of course. But Vanning dined a dozen times here, drank with the Squire, and gave to the Squire's wife a brooch once owned by Charles the First. Mistress Mary spoke of it furiously to Poynter.

"Then the unexpected news came.

"Oakley was safe in his house and lands. An Act had been passed to confirm all sales and leases of property since the Civil Wars. It meant that Oakley was once more the well-to-do son-in-law; and the Squire could no longer object to his bargain.

"I have here an account of how this news was received at the manor. I did not get it from Poynter's diary. I got it from the records of the coroner's inquest. What astonishes us when we read these chronicles is the blunt directness, the violence, like a wind, or a pistol clapped to the head, with which people set about getting what they wanted. For, just two months afterwards, there was murder done."

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Our host paused. The room was full of the reflections of firelight. He glanced at the ceiling; what we heard up there was merely the sound of a servant walking overhead.

"Vanning," he went on, "seems to have taken the fact quietly enough. He was here at the manor when Oakley arrived with the news. It was five or six o'clock in the afternoon. Mistress Mary, the Squire, the Squire's wife, and Vanning were sitting in the Ladies' Withdrawing Room. This was (and is) the room at the head of the stairs—a little square place, with two 'panel' windows that would not open. It was furnished with chairs of oak and

brocade; a needlework-frame; and a sideboard chastely bearing a plate of oranges, a glass jug of water, and some glasses.

"There was only one candle burning, at some distance from Vanning, so that nobody had a good view of his face. He sat in his riding-coat, with his sword across his lap. When Oakley came in with the news, he was observed to put his hand on his sword; but afterwards he 'made a leg' and left without more words.

"The wedding had originally been set for the end of November; both Oakley and Mistress Mary still claimed this date. It was accepted with all the more cheerfulness by the Squire, since, in the intervening months, Vanning had not yet received any dazzling benefits. True, he had been awarded £500 a year by the Healing and Blessed Parliament. But he was little better off than Oakley; a bargain was a bargain, said the Squire, and Oakley was his own dear son. Nobody seems to know what Vanning did in the interim, except that he settled down quietly at Mallingsford.

"But from this time curious rumours began to go about the countryside. They all centred round Richard Oakley. Poynter records some of them, at first evidently not even realizing their direction. They were as light as dandelion-clocks blown off, but they floated and settled.

"Who was Oakley? What did anybody know about him, except that he had come here and bought land under Oliver? He had vast learning, and above a hundred books in his house; what need did he have of that? What had he been? A parson? A doctor of letters of physic? Or letters of a more unnatural kind? Why did he go for long walks in the wood, particularly after dusk?

"Oakley, if questioned, said that this was his nature. But an honest man, meaning an ordinary man, could understand no such nature. A wood was thick, you could not tell what might be in it after nightfall; an honest man preferred the tavern. Such whispers were all the more rapid-moving because of the troubled times. The broken bones of a Revolution are not easily healed. Then there was the unnatural state of the weather. In winter there was no cold at all: the roads dusty; a swarm of flies; and the rose-bushes full of leaves into the following January.

"Oakley heard none of the rumours, or pretended to hear none. It was Jamy Achen, a lad of weak mind and therefore afraid of nothing, who saw something following Richard Oakley through Gallows Copse. The boy said he had not got a good look at it, since the time was after dusk. But he heard it rustle behind the trees, peering out at intervals after Mr. Oakley. He said that it seemed human, but that he was not sure it was alive.

"On the night of Friday, the 26th November, Gerald Vanning rode over to this house alone. It was seven o'clock, a late hour for the country. He was admitted to the lower hall by Kitts, the Squire's steward, and he asked for Mr. Oakley. Kitts told him that Mr. Oakley was above-stairs with Mistress Mary, and that the Squire was asleep over supper with Mr. Poynter.

"It is certain that Vanning was wearing no sword. Kitts held the candle high and looked at him narrowly, for he seemed on a wire of apprehension and kept glancing over his shoulder as he pulled off his gloves. He wore jack-boots, a riding-coat half-buttoned, a lace band at the neck, and a flat-crowned beaver hat with a gold band.

Under his sharp nose there was a little edge of moustache, and he was sweating.

“ ‘Mr. Oakley has brought a friend with him, I think,’ says Vanning.

“ ‘No, sir,’ says Kitts, ‘he is alone.’

“ ‘But I am sure his friend has followed him,’ says Vanning, again twitching his head round and looking over his shoulder. He also jumped as though something had touched him, and kept turning round and round and looking sharply into corners as though he were playing hide-and-seek.

“ ‘Well!’ says Mr. Vanning, with a whistle of breath through his nose. ‘Take me to Mistress Mary. Stop! First fetch two or three brisk lads from the kitchen, and you shall go with me.’

“The steward was alarmed, and asked what was the matter. Vanning would not tell him, but instructed him to see that the servants carried cudgels and lights. Four of them went above-stairs. Vanning knocked at the door of the Withdrawing Room, and was bidden to enter. The servants remained outside, and both the lights and the cudgels trembled in their hands: later they did not know why.

“As the door opened and closed, Kitts caught a glimpse of Mistress Mary sitting by the table in the rose-brocade dress she reserved usually for Sundays, and Oakley sitting on the edge of the table beside her. Both looked round as though surprised.

“Presently Kitts heard voices talking, but so low he could not make out what was said. The voices spoke more rapidly; then there was a sound of moving about. The next thing to which Kitts could testify was a noise as

though a candlestick had been knocked over. There was a thud; a high-pitched kind of noise; muffled breathing sounds and a sort of thrashing on the floor; and Mistress Mary suddenly beginning to scream over it.

"Kitts and his three followers laid hold of the door, but someone had bolted it. They attacked the door in a way that roused the Squire in the dining-room below, but it held. Inside, after a silence, someone was heard to stumble and grope towards the door. Squire Radlow and Mr. Poynter came running up the stairs just as the door was unbolted from inside.

"Mistress Mary was standing there, panting, with her eyes wide and staring. She was holding up one edge of her full skirt, where it was stained with blood as though someone had scoured and polished a weapon there. She cried to them to bring lights; and one of the servants held up a lantern in the doorway.

"Vanning was half-lying, half-crouching over against the far wall, with a face like oiled paper as he lifted round his head to look at them. But they were looking at Oakley, or what was left of Oakley. He had fallen near the table, with the candle smashed beside him. They could not tell how many wounds there were in Oakley's neck and body; above a dozen, Poynter thought, and he was right. Vanning stumbled over and tried to lift him up, but of course, it was too late. Now listen to Poynter's own words:

" 'Mr. Radlow ran to Mr. Vanning and laid hold of him, crying: "You are a murderer! You have murdered him!" Mr. Vanning cried to him: "By God and His mercy, I have not touched him! I have no sword or dagger by

me!" And indeed, this was true. For he was flung down on the floor by this bloody work, and ordered to be searched, but not so much as a pin was there in his clothes.

" 'I had observed by the nature of the wide, gaping wounds that some such blade as a broad knife had inflicted them, or the like. But what had done this was a puzzle, for every inch of the room did we search, high, low and turnover; and still not so much as a pin in crack or crevice.

" 'Mr. Vanning deposed that as he was speaking with Mr. Oakley, something struck out the light, and overthrew Mr. Oakley, and knelt on his chest. But who or what this was, or where it had gone when the light was brought, he could not say. ' "

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Bending close to the firelight, our host finished reading the notes from the sheet of paper in his hands. He folded up the paper, put it back in his pocket, and looked at us.

The historian's wife, who had drawn closer to her husband, shifted uneasily. "I wish you wouldn't tell us these things," she complained. "But tell us, anyway. I still don't understand. What was the man killed with, then?"

"That," said our host, lighting his pipe, "is the question. If you accept natural laws as governing this world, there wasn't anything that could have killed him. Look here a moment!"

(For we were all looking at the ceiling.)

"The Squire begged Mistress Mary to tell him what had

happened. First she began to whimper a little, and for the first time in her life she fainted. The Squire wanted to throw some water over her, but Vanning carried her downstairs and they forced brandy between her teeth. When she recovered she was a trifle wandering, with no story at all.

"Something had put out the light. There had been a sound like a fall and a scuffling. Then the noise of moving about, and the smell of blood in a close, confined room. Something seemed to be plucking or pulling at her skirts. She does not appear to have remembered anything more.

"Of course, Vanning was put under restraint, and a magistrate sent for. They gathered in this room, which was a good deal bleaker and barer than it is to-day; but they pinned Vanning in the chimney-corner of that fireplace. The Squire drew his sword and attempted to run Vanning through: while both of them wept, as the fashion was. But Poynter ordered two of the lads to hold the Squire back, quoting himself later as saying: 'This must be done in good order.'

"Now, what I want to impress on you is that these people were not fools. They had possibly a cruder turn of thought and speech; but they were used to dealing with realities like wood and beef and leather. Here was a reality. Oakley's wounds were six inches deep and an inch wide, from a thick, flat blade that in places had scraped the bone. But there wasn't any such blade, and they knew it.

"Four men stood in the door and held lights while they searched for that knife (if there was such a thing): and they didn't find it. They pulled the room to pieces; and they

didn't find it. Nobody could have whisked it out, past the men in the door. The windows didn't open, being set into the wall like panels, so nobody could have got rid of the knife there. There was only one door, outside which the servants had been standing. Something had cut a man to pieces; yet it simply wasn't there.

"Vanning, pale but calmer, repeated his account. Questioned as to why he had come to the house that night, he answered that there had been a matter to settle with Oakley. Asked what it was, he said he had not liked the conditions in his own home for the past month: he would beg Mr. Oakley to mend them. He had done Mr. Oakley no harm, beyond trying to take a bride from him, and therefore he would ask Mr. Oakley to call off his dogs. What dogs? Vanning explained that he did not precisely mean dogs. He meant something that had got into his bedroom cupboard, but was only there at night; and he had reasons for thinking Mr. Oakley had whistled it there. It had been there only since he had been paying attentions to Mistress Mary.

"These men were only human. Poynter ordered the steward to go up and search the little room again and the steward wouldn't go.

"That little seed of terror had begun to grow like a mango-tree under a cloth, and push up the cloth and stir out tentacles. It was easy to forget the broad, smiling face of Richard Oakley, and to remember the curious 'shifting' of his eyes. When you recalled that, after all, Oakley was twice Mistress Mary's age, you might begin to wonder just whom you had been entertaining at bread and meat.

"Even Squire Radlow did not care to go upstairs again in his own house. Vanning, sweating and squirming in

the chimney corner, plucked up courage as a confident young man and volunteered to go. They let him. But no sooner had he got into the little room than the door clapped again, and he came out running. It was touch-and-go whether they would desert the house in a body."

Again our host paused. In the silence it was the Inspector who spoke, examining his cigar and speaking with some scepticism. He had a common-sense voice, which restored reasonable values.

"Look here," he said, "are you telling us local bogytals, or are you seriously putting this forward as evidence?"

"As evidence given at a coroner's inquest."

"Reliable evidence?"

"I believe so."

"I don't," returned the Inspector, drawing the air through a hollow tooth. "After all, I suppose we've got to admit that a man was murdered, since there was an inquest. But if he died of being hacked or slashed with thirteen wounds, some instrument made those wounds. What happened to that weapon? You say it wasn't in the room; but how do we know that? How do we know it wasn't hidden away somewhere, and they simply couldn't find it?"

"I think I can give you my word," said our host slowly, "that no weapon was hidden there."

"Then what the devil happened to it? A knife at least six inches in the blade, and an inch broad——"

"Yes. But the fact is, nobody could see it."

"It wasn't hidden anywhere, and yet nobody could see it?"

"That's right."

"An invisible weapon?"

"Yes," answered our host, with a curious shining in his eyes. "A quite literally invisible weapon."

"How do you know?" demanded his wife abruptly.

"Hitherto she had taken no part in the conversation. But she had been studying him in an odd way, sitting on a hassock; and, as he hesitated, she rose at him in a glory of accusation.

"You villain!" she cried. "Ooh, you unutterable villain! You've been making it all up! Just to make everybody afraid to go to bed, and because *I* didn't know anything about the place, you've been telling us a pack of lies——"

But he stopped her.

"No. If I had been making it up, I should have told you it was a story." Again he hesitated, almost biting his nails. "I'll admit that I may have been trying to mystify you a bit. That's reasonable, because I honestly don't know the truth myself. I can make a guess at it, that's all. I can make a guess at how those wounds came there. But that isn't the real problem. That isn't what bothers me, don't you see?"

Here the historian intervened. "A wide acquaintance with sensational fiction," he said, "gives me the line on which you're working. I submit that the victim was stabbed with an icicle, as in several tales I could mention. Afterwards the ice melted—and was, in consequence, an invisible weapon."

"No," said our host.

"I mean," he went on, "that it's not feasible. You would hardly find an icicle in such unnaturally warm weather as they were having. And icicles are brittle: you wouldn't get a flat, broad icicle of such steel-strength and

sharpness that thirteen stabs could be made and the bone scraped in some of them. And an icicle isn't invisible. Under the circumstances, this knife was invisible—despite its size."

"Bosh!" said the historian's wife. "There isn't any such thing."

"There is if you come to think about it. Of course, it's only an idea of mine, and it may be all wrong. Also, as I say, it's not the real problem, though it's so closely associated with the real problem that——

"But you haven't heard the rest of the story. Shall I conclude it?"

"By all means."

"I am afraid there are no great alarms or sensations," our host went on, "though the very name of Richard Oakley became a nightmare to keep people indoors at night. 'Oakley's friend' became a local synonym for anything that might get you if you didn't look sharp. One or two people saw him walking in the woods afterwards, his head was on one side and the stab-wounds were still there.

"A grand jury of Sussex gentlemen, headed by Sir Benedict Skene, completely exonerated Gerald Vanning. The coroner's jury had already said 'persons or things unknown,' and added words of sympathy with Mistress Mary to the effect that she was luckily quit of a dangerous bargain. It may not surprise you to hear that eighteen months after Oakley's death she married Vanning.

"She was completely docile, though her old vivacity had gone. In those days young ladies did not remain spinsters through choice. She smiled, nodded, and made the proper responses, though it seems probable that she never got over what had happened.

“Matters became settled, even humdrum. Vanning waxed prosperous and respectable. His subsequent career I have had to look up in other sources, since Poynter’s diary breaks off at the end of ’64. But a grateful Government made him Sir Gerald Vanning, Bart. He became a leading member of the Royal Society, tinkering with the toys of science. His cheeks filled out, the slyness left his eyes, a periwig adorned his head, and four Flanders mares drew his coach to Gresham House. At home he often chose this house to live in when Squire Radlow died; he moved between here and Mallingford with the soberest grace. The little room, once such a cause of terror, he seldom visited; but its door was not locked.

“His wife saw to it that these flagstones were kept scrubbed, and every stick of wood shining. She was a good wife. He for his part was a good husband: he treated her well and drank only for his thirst, though she often pressed him to drink more than he did. It is at this pitch of domesticity that we get the record of another coroner’s inquest.

“Vanning’s throat was cut on the night of the 5th October, ’67.

“On an evening of high winds, he and his wife came here from Mallingford. He was in unusually good spirits, having just done a profitable piece of business. They had supper together, and Vanning drank a great deal. His wife kept him company at it. (Didn’t I tell you she once drank off a pint of wine at a draught, for a wager?) She said it would make him sleep soundly; for it seems to be true that he sometimes talked in his sleep. At eight o’clock, she tells us, she went up to bed, leaving him still at the table. At what time he went upstairs we do not know,

and neither do the servants. Kitts, the steward, thought he heard him stumbling up that staircase out there at a very late hour. Kitts also thought he heard someone crying out, but a high October gale was blowing and he could not be sure.

"On the morning of the 6th October, a cowherd named Coates was coming round the side of this house in a sodden daybreak from which the storm had just cleared. He was on his way to the west meadow, and stopped to drink at a rain-water barrel under the eaves just below the little room at the head of the stairs. As he was about to drink, he noticed a curious colour in the water. Looking up to find out how it had come there, he saw Sir Gerald Vanning's face looking down at him under the shadow of the yellow trees. Sir Gerald's head was sticking out of the window, and did not move; neither did the eyes. Some of the glass in the window was still intact, though his head had been run through it, and——"

It was at this point that the Inspector uttered an exclamation.

It was an exclamation of enlightenment. Our host looked at him with a certain grimness, and nodded.

"Yes," he said. "You know the truth now, don't you?"

"The truth?" repeated the historian's wife, almost screaming with perplexity. "The truth about what?"

"About the murder of Oakley," said our host. "About the trick Vanning used to murder Oakley seven years before.

"I'm fairly sure he did it," our host went on, nodding reflectively. "Nothing delighted the people of that time so much as tricks and gadgets of that very sort. A clock that ran by rolling bullets down an inclined plane; a diving-

bell; a burglar-alarm; the Royal Society played with all of them. And Vanning (study his portrait one day) profited by the monkey-tricks he learned in exile. He invented an invisible knife."

"But see here ——!" protested the historian.

"Of course he planned the whole thing against Oakley. Oakley was no more a necromancer or a consorter with devils than I am. All those rumours about him were started with a definite purpose by Vanning himself. A crop of whispers, a weak-minded lad to be bribed, the whole power of suggestion set going; and Vanning was ready for business.

"On the given night he rode over to this house, alone, with a certain kind of knife in his pocket. He made a great show of pretending he was chased by imaginary monsters, and he alarmed the steward. With the servants for witnesses, he went upstairs to see Oakley and Mistress Mary. He bolted the door. He spoke pleasantly to them. When he had managed to distract the girl's attention, he knocked out the light, tripped up Oakley, and set upon him with that certain kind of knife. There had to be many wounds and much blood, so he could later account for blood on himself. The girl was too terrified in the dark to move. He had only to clean his knife on a soft but stiff-brocaded gown, and then put down the knife in full view. Nobody noticed it."

The historian blinked. "Admirable!" he said. "Nobody noticed it, eh? Can you tell me the sort of blade that can be placed in full view without anybody noticing it?"

"Yes," said our host. "A blade made of ordinary plain glass, placed in the large glass jug full of water standing on a sideboard table."

There was a silence.

"I told you about that glass water-jug. It was a familiar fixture. Nobody examines a transparent jug of water. Vanning could have made a glass knife with the crudest of cutting tools; and glass is murderous stuff—strong, flat, sharp-edged, and as sharp-pointed as you want to make it. There was only candle-light, remember. Any minute traces of blood that might be left on the glass knife would sink as sediment in the water, while everybody looked straight at the weapon in the water and never noticed it. But Vanning (you also remember?) prevented Squire Radlow from throwing water on the girl when she fainted. Instead he carried her downstairs. Afterwards he told an admirable series of horror-tales; he found an excuse to go back to the room again alone, slip the knife into his sleeve, and get rid of it in the confusion."

The Inspector frowned thoughtfully. "But the real problem——" he said.

"Yes. If that was the way it was done, did the wife know? Vanning talked in his sleep, remember."

We looked at each other. The historian's wife, after a glance round, asked the question that was in our minds.

"And what was the verdict of *that* inquest?"

"Oh, that was simple," said our host. "Death by misadventure, from falling through a window while drunk and cutting his throat on the glass. Somebody observed that there were marks of heels on the board floor as though he might have been dragged there, but this wasn't insisted on. Mistress Mary lived on in complete happiness, and died at the ripe age of eighty-

six, full of benevolence and sleep. These are natural explanations. Everything is natural. There's nothing wrong with that little room at the head of the stairs. It's been turned into a bedroom now; I assure you it's comfortable; and anyone who cares to sleep there is free to do so. But at the same time——”

“Quite,” we said.

Blind Man's Hood

ALTHOUGH one snowflake had already sifted past the lights, the great doors of the house stood open. It seemed less a snowflake than a shadow; for a bitter wind whipped after it, and the doors creaked. Inside, Rodney and Muriel Hunter could see a dingy, narrow hall paved in dull red tiles, with a Jacobean staircase at the rear. (At that time, of course, there was no dead woman lying inside.)

To find such a place in the loneliest part of the Weald of Kent—a seventeenth-century country house whose floors had grown humped and its beams scrubbed by the years—was what they had expected. Even to find electricity was not surprising. But Rodney Hunter thought he had seldom seen so many lights in one house, and Muriel had been wondering about it ever since their car turned the bend in the road. “Clearlawns” lived up to its name. It stood in the midst of a slope of flat grass, now wiry white with frost, and there was no tree or shrub within twenty yards of it. Those lights contrasted with a certain inhospitable and damp air about the house, as though the owner were compelled to keep them burning.

“But why is the front door *open*?” insisted Muriel.

In the drive-way, the engine of their car coughed and died. The house was now a secret blackness of gables, emitting light at every chink, and silhouetting the stalks of the wisteria vines which climbed it. On either side of

the front door were little-paned windows whose curtains had not been drawn. Towards their left they could see into a low dining-room, with table and sideboard set for a cold supper; towards their right was a darkish library moving with the reflections of a bright fire.

The sight of the fire warmed Rodney Hunter, but it made him feel guilty. They were very late. At five o'clock, without fail, he had promised Jack Bannister, they would be at "Clearlawns" to inaugurate the Christmas party.

Engine-trouble in leaving London was one thing; idling at a country pub along the way, drinking hot ale and listening to the wireless sing carols until a sort of Dickensian jollity stole into you, was something else. But both he and Muriel were young; they were very fond of each other and of things in general; and they had worked themselves into a glow of Christmas, which—as they stood before the creaking doors of "Clearlawns"—grew oddly cool.

There was no real reason, Rodney thought, to feel disquiet. He hoisted their luggage, including a big box of presents for Jack and Molly's children out of the rear of the car. That his footsteps should sound loud on the gravel was only natural. He put his head into the doorway and whistled. Then he began to bang the knocker. Its sound seemed to seek out every corner of the house and then come back like a questing dog; but there was no response.

"I'll tell you something else," he said. "There's nobody in the house."

Muriel ran up the three steps to stand beside him. She had drawn her fur coat close around her, and her face was bright with cold.

"But that's impossible!" she said. "I mean, even if they're out, the servants — ! Molly told me she keeps a cook and two maids. Are you sure we've got the right place?"

"Yes. The name's on the gate, and there's no other house within a mile."

With the same impulse they craned their necks to look through the windows of the dining-room on the left. Cold fowl on the sideboard, a great bowl of chestnuts; and, now they could see it, another good fire, before which stood a chair with a piece of knitting put aside on it. Rodney tried the knocker again, vigorously, but the sound was all wrong. It was as though they were even more lonely in that core of light, with the east wind rushing across the Weald, and the door creaking again.

"I suppose we'd better go in," said Rodney. He added, with a lack of Christmas spirit: "Here, this is a devil of a trick! What do you think has happened? I'll swear that fire has been made up in the last fifteen minutes."

He stepped into the hall and set down the bags. As he was turning to close the door, Muriel put her hand on his arm.

"I say, Rod. Do you think you'd better close it?"

"Why not?"

"I—I don't know."

"The place is getting chilly enough as it is," he pointed out, unwilling to admit that the same thought had occurred to him. He closed both doors and shot their bar into place; and, at the same moment, a girl came out of the door to the library on the right.

She was such a pleasant-faced girl that they both felt a sense of relief. Why she had not answered the knocking

had ceased to be a question; she filled a void. She was pretty, not more than twenty-one or two, and had an air of primness which made Rodney Hunter vaguely associate her with a governess or a secretary, though Jack Bannister had never mentioned any such person. She was plump, but with a curiously narrow waist; and she wore brown. Her brown hair was neatly parted, and her brown eyes—long eyes, which might have given a hint of secrecy or curious smiles if they had not been so placid—looked concerned. In one hand she carried what looked like a small white bag of linen or cotton. And she spoke with a dignity which did not match her years.

“I am most terribly sorry,” she told them. “I *thought* I heard someone, but I was so busy that I could not be sure. Will you forgive me?”

She smiled. Hunter’s private view was that his knocking had been loud enough to wake the dead; but he murmured conventional things. As though conscious of some faint incongruity about the white bag in her hand, she held it up.

“For Blind Man’s Bluff,” she explained. “They do cheat so, I’m afraid, and not only the children. If one uses an ordinary handkerchief tied round the eyes, they always manage to get a corner loose. But if you take this, and you put it fully over a person’s head, and you tie it round the neck” a sudden gruesome image occurred to Rodney Hunter—“then it works so much better, don’t you think?” Her eyes seemed to turn inward, and to grow absent. “But I must not keep you talking here. You are ?”

“My name is Hunter. This is my wife. I’m afraid we’ve arrived late, but I understood Mr. Bannister was expecting——”

"He did not tell you?" asked the girl in brown.

"Tell me what?"

"Everyone here, including the servants, is always out of the house at this hour on this particular date. It is the custom; I believe it has been the custom for more than sixty years. There is some sort of special church service."

Rodney Hunter's imagination had been devising all sorts of fantastic explanations: the first of them being that this demure lady had murdered the members of the household, and was engaged in disposing of the bodies. What put this nonsensical notion into his head he could not tell, unless it was his own profession of detective-story writing. But he felt relieved to hear a commonplace explanation. Then the woman spoke again.

"Of course, it is a pretext, really. The rector, that dear man, invented it all those years ago to save embarrassment. What happened here had nothing to do with the murder, since the dates were so different; and I suppose most people have forgotten now why the tenants *do* prefer to stay away during seven and eight o'clock on Christmas Eve. I doubt if Mrs. Bannister even knows the real reason, though I should imagine Mr. Bannister must know it. But what happens here cannot be very pleasant, and it wouldn't do to have the children see it—would it?"

Muriel spoke with such sudden directness that her husband knew she was afraid. "Who are you?" Muriel said. "And what on earth are you talking about?"

"I am quite sane, really," their hostess assured them, with a smile that was half-cheery and half-coy. "I dare say it must be all very confusing to you, poor dear. But I am forgetting my duties. Please come in and sit down before the fire, and let me offer you something to drink."

She took them into the library on the right, going ahead with a walk that was like a bounce, and looking over her shoulder out of those long eyes. The library was a long, low room with beams. The windows towards the road were uncurtained; but those in the side-wall, where a faded red-brick fireplace stood, were bay windows with draperies closed across them. As their hostess put them before the fire, Hunter could have sworn he saw one of the draperies move.

"You need not worry about it," she assured him, following his glance towards the bay. "Even if you looked in there, you might not see anything now. I believe some gentleman did try it once, a long time ago. He stayed in the house for a wager. But when he pulled the curtain back, he did not see anything in the bay—at least, anything quite. He felt some hair, and it moved. That is why they have so many lights nowadays."

Muriel had sat down on a sofa, and was lighting a cigarette: to the rather prim disapproval of their hostess, Hunter thought.

"May we have a hot drink?" Muriel asked crisply. "And then, if you don't mind, we might walk over and meet the Bannisters coming from church."

"Oh, please don't do that!" cried the other. She had been standing by the fireplace, her hands folded and turned outwards. Now she ran across to sit down beside Muriel; and the swiftness of her movement, no less than the touch of her hand on Muriel's arm, made the latter draw back.

Hunter was now completely convinced that their hostess was out of her head. Why she held such fascination for him, though, he could not understand. In her

eagerness to keep them there, the girl had come upon a new idea. On a table behind the sofa, book-ends held a row of modern novels. Conspicuously displayed probably due to Molly Bannister's tact were two of Rodney Hunter's detective stories. The girl put a finger on them.

"May I ask if you wrote these?"

He admitted it.

"Then," she said with sudden composure, "it would probably interest you to hear about the murder. It was a most perplexing business, you know; the police could make nothing of it, and no one ever has been able to solve it." An arresting eye fixed on his. "It happened out in the hall there. A poor woman was killed where there was no one to kill her, and no one could have done it. But she was murdered."

Hunter started to get up from his chair; then he changed his mind, and sat down again. "Go on," he said.

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"You must forgive me if I am a little uncertain about dates," she urged. "I think it was in the early eighteenth-seventies, and I am sure it was in early February because of the snow. It was a bad winter then; the farmers' livestock all died. My people have been bred up in the district for years, and I know that. The house here was much as it is now, except that there was none of this lighting (only paraffin lamps, poor girl! ; and you were obliged to pump up what water you wanted; and people read the newspaper quite through, and discussed it for days.

"The people were a little different to look at, too. I am

sure I do not understand why we think beards are so strange nowadays; they seem to think that men who had beards never had any emotions. But even young men wore them then, and looked handsome enough. There was a newly married couple living in this house at the time: at least, they had been married only the summer before. They were named Edward and Jane Waycross, and it was considered a good match everywhere.

"Edward Waycross did not have a beard, but he had bushy side-whiskers which he kept curled. He was not a handsome man, either, being somewhat dry and hard-favoured; but he was a religious man, and a good man, and an excellent man of business, they say: a manufacturer of agricultural implements at Hawkhurst. He had determined that Jane Anders (as she was) would make him a good wife, and I dare say she did. The girl had several suitors. Although Mr. Waycross was the best match, I know it surprised people a little when she accepted him, because she was thought to have been fond of another man—a more striking man, whom many of the young girls were after. This was Jeremy Wilkes: who came of a very good family, but was considered wicked. He was no younger than Mr. Waycross, but he had a great black beard, and wore white waistcoats with gold chains, and drove a gig. Of course, there had been gossip, but that was because Jane Anders was considered pretty."

Their hostess had been sitting back against the sofa, quietly folding the little white bag with one hand, and speaking in a prim voice. Now she did something which turned her hearers cold.

You have probably seen the same thing done many times. She had been touching her cheek lightly with the

fingers of the other hand. In doing so, she touched the flesh at the corner under her lower eyelid, and accidentally drew down the corner of that eyelid—which should have exposed the red part of the inner lid at the corner of the eye. It was not red. It was of a sickly pale colour.

“In the course of his business dealings,” she went on, “Mr. Waycross had often to go to London, and usually he was obliged to remain overnight. But Jane Waycross was not afraid to remain alone in the house. She had a good servant, a staunch old woman, and a good dog. Even so, Mr. Waycross commended her for her courage.”

The girl smiled. “On the night I wish to tell you of, in February, Mr. Waycross was absent. Unfortunately, too, the old servant was absent; she had been called away as a midwife to attend her cousin, and Jane Waycross had allowed her to go. This was known in the village, since all such affairs are well known, and some uneasiness was felt—this house being isolated, as you know. But she was not afraid.

“It was a very cold night, with a heavy fall of snow which had stopped about nine o’clock. You must know, beyond doubt, that poor Jane Waycross was alive after it had stopped snowing. It must have been nearly half-past nine when a Mr. Moody—a very good and sober man who lived in Hawkhurst—was driving home along the road past this house. As you know, it stands in the middle of a great bare stretch of lawn; and you can see the house clearly from the road. Mr. Moody saw poor Jane at the window of one of the upstairs bedrooms, with a candle in her hand, closing the shutters. But he was not the only witness who saw her alive.

“On that same evening, Mr. Wilkes (the handsome

gentleman I spoke to you of a moment ago) had been at a tavern in the village of Five Ashes with Dr. Sutton, the local doctor, and a racing gentleman named Pawley. At about half-past eleven they started to drive home in Mr. Wilkes's gig to Cross-in-Hand. I am afraid they had been drinking, but they were all in their sober senses. The landlord of the tavern remembered the time because he had stood in the doorway to watch the gig, which had fine yellow wheels, go spanking away as though there were no snow; and Mr. Wilkes in one of the new round hats with a curly brim.

"There was a bright moon. 'And no danger,' Dr. Sutton always said afterwards; 'shadows of trees and fences as clear as though a silhouette-cutter had made 'em for sixpence.' But when they were passing this house Mr. Wilkes pulled up sharp. There was a bright light in the window of one of the downstairs rooms—this room, in fact. They sat out there looking round the hood of the gig, and wondering.

"Mr. Wilkes spoke: 'I don't like this,' he said. 'You know, gentlemen, that Waycross is still in London; and the lady in question is in the habit of retiring early. I am going up there to find out if anything is wrong.'

"With that he jumped out of the gig, his black beard jutting out and his breath smoking. He said: 'And if it is a burglar, then, by Something, gentlemen'—I will not repeat the word he used—'by Something, gentlemen, I'll settle him.' He walked through the gate and up to the house—they could follow every step he made—and looked into the windows of this room here. Presently he returned looking relieved (they could see him by the light of the gig lamps), but wiping the moisture off his forehead.

“ ‘It is all right,’ he said to them; ‘Waycross has come home. But, by Something, gentlemen, he is growing thinner these days, or it is shadows.’

“Then he told them what he had seen. If you look through the front windows —there—you can look sideways and see out through the doorway into the main hall. He said he had seen Mrs. Waycross standing in the hall with her back to the staircase, wearing a blue dressing-wrap over her nightgown, and her hair down round her shoulders. Standing in front of her, with his back to Mr. Wilkes, was a tallish, thin man like Mr. Waycross, with a long greatcoat and a tall hat like Mr. Waycross’s. *She* was carrying either a candle or a lamp; and he remembered how the tall hat seemed to wag back and forth, as though the man were talking to her or putting out his hands towards her. For he said he could not see the woman’s face.

“Of course, it was not Mr. Waycross; but how were they to know that?

“At about seven o’clock next morning, Mrs. Randall, the old servant, returned. (A fine boy had been born to her cousin the night before.) Mrs. Randall came home through the white dawn and the white snow, and found the house all locked up. She could get no answer to her knocking. Being a woman of great resolution, she eventually broke a window and got in. But, when she saw what was in the front hall, she went out screaming for help.

“Poor Jane was past help. I know I should not speak of these things; but I must. She was lying on her face in the hall. From the waist down her body was much charred and unclothed, you know, because fire had burnt

away most of the nightgown and the dressing-wrap. The tiles of the hall were soaked with blood and paraffin oil, the oil having come from a broken lamp with a thick blue-silk shade which was lying a little distance away. Near it was a china candlestick with a candle. This fire had also charred a part of the panelling of the wall, and a part of the staircase. Fortunately, the floor is of brick tiles, and there had not been much paraffin left in the lamp, or the house would have been set afire.

"But she had not died from burns alone. Her throat had been cut with a deep slash from some very sharp blade. But she had been alive for a while to feel both things, for she had crawled forward on her hands while she was burning. It was a cruel death, a horrible death for a soft person like that."

There was a pause. The expression on the face of the narrator, the plump girl in the brown dress, altered slightly. So did the expression of her eyes. She was sitting beside Muriel; and moved a little closer.

"Of course, the police came. I do not understand such things, I am afraid, but they found that the house had not been robbed. They also noticed the odd thing I have mentioned, that there was both a lamp *and* a candle in a candlestick near her. The lamp came from Mr. and Mrs. Waycross's bedroom upstairs, and so did the candlestick: there were no other lamps or candles downstairs except the lamps waiting to be filled next morning in the back kitchen. But the police thought she would not have come downstairs carrying both the lamp *and* the candle as well.

"She must have brought the lamp, because that was broken. When the murderer took hold of her, they

thought, she had dropped the lamp, and it went out; the paraffin spilled, but did not catch fire. Then this man in the tall hat, to finish his work after he had cut her throat, went upstairs, and got a candle, and set fire to the spilled oil. I am stupid at these things; but even I should have guessed that this must mean someone familiar with the house. Also, if she came downstairs, it must have been to let someone in at the front door; and that could not have been a burglar.

"You may be sure all the gossips were like police from the start, even when the police hemm'd and haw'd, because they knew Mrs. Waycross must have opened the door to a man who was not her husband. And immediately they found an indication of this, in the mess that the fire and blood had made in the hall. Some distance away from poor Jane's body there was a medicine-bottle, such as chemists use. I think it had been broken in two pieces; and on one intact piece they found sticking some fragments of a letter that had not been quite burned. It was in a man's handwriting, not her husband's, and they made out enough of it to understand. It was full of—expressions of love, you know, and it made an appointment to meet her there on that night."

Rodney Hunter, as the girl paused, felt impelled to ask a question.

"Did they know whose handwriting it was?"

"It was Jeremy Wilkes's," replied the other simply. "Though they never proved that, never more than slightly suspected it, and the circumstances did not bear it out. In fact, a knife stained with blood was actually found in Mr. Wilkes's possession. But the police never brought it to anything, poor souls. For, you see, not

Mr. Wilkes or anyone else in the world—could possibly have done the murder.”

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“I don’t understand that,” said Hunter, rather sharply.

“Forgive me if I am stupid about telling things,” urged their hostess in a tone of apology. She seemed to be listening to the chimney growl under a cold sky, and listening with hard, placid eyes. “But even the village gossips could tell that. When Mrs. Randall came here to the house on that morning, both the front and the back doors were locked and securely bolted on the inside. All the windows were locked on the inside. If you will look at the fastenings in this dear place, you will know what that means.

“But, bless you, that was the least of it! I told you about the snow. The snowfall had stopped at nine o’clock in the evening, hours and hours before Mrs. Waycross was murdered. When the police came, there were only two separate sets of footprints in the great unmarked half-acre of snow round the house. One set belonged to Mr. Wilkes, who had come up and looked in through the window the night before. The other belonged to Mrs. Randall. The police could follow and explain both sets of tracks; but there were no other tracks at all, and no one was hiding in the house.

“Of course, it was absurd to suspect Mr. Wilkes. It was not only that he told a perfectly straight story about the man in the tall hat; but both Dr. Sutton and Mr. Pawley, who drove back with him from Five Ashes, were there to swear he could not have done it. You understand, he came no closer to the house than the windows of this

room. They could watch every step he made in the moonlight, and they did. Afterwards he drove home with Dr. Sutton, and slept there, or, I should say, they continued their terrible drinking until daylight. It is true that they found in his possession a knife with blood on it, but he explained that he had used the knife to gut a rabbit.

"It was the same with poor Mrs. Randall, who had been up all night about her midwife's duties, though naturally it was even more absurd to think of *her*. But there were no other footprints at all, either coming to or going from the house, in all that stretch of snow; and all the ways in or out were locked on the inside."

It was Muriel who spoke then, in a voice that tried to be crisp, but wavered in spite of her. "Are you telling us that all this is true?" she demanded.

"I am teasing you a little, my dear," said the other. "But, really and truly, it all did happen. Perhaps I will show you in a moment."

"I suppose it was really the husband who did it?" asked Muriel in a bored tone.

"Poor Mr. Waycross!" said their hostess tenderly. "He spent that night in a temperance hotel near Charing Cross Station, as he always did, and, of course, he never left it. When he learned about his wife's duplicity"—again Hunter thought she was going to pull down a corner of her eyelid—"it nearly drove him out of his mind, poor fellow. I think he gave up agricultural machinery and took to preaching, but I am not sure. I know he left the district soon afterwards, and before he left he insisted on burning the mattress of their bed. It was a dreadful scandal."

"But in that case," insisted Hunter, "who did kill her?"

And, if there were no footprints and all the doors were locked, how did the murderer come or go? Finally, if all this happened in February, what does it have to do with people being out of the house on Christmas Eve?"

"Ah, that is the real story. That is what I meant to tell you."

She grew very subdued.

"It must have been very interesting to watch the people alter and grow older, or find queer paths, in the years afterwards. For, of course, nothing did happen as yet. The police presently gave it all up; for decency's sake it was allowed to rest. There was a new pump built in the market square; and the news of the Prince of Wales's going to India in '75 to talk about; and presently a new family came to live at 'Clearlawns,' and began to raise their children. The trees and the rains in summer were just the same, you know. It must have been seven or eight years before anything happened, for Jane Waycross was very patient.

"Several of the people had died in the meantime. Mrs. Randall had, in a fit of quinsy; and so had Dr. Sutton, but that was a great mercy, because he fell by the way when he was going out to perform an amputation with too much of the drink in him. But Mr. Pawley had prospered and, above all, so had Mr. Wilkes. He had become an even finer figure of a man, they tell me, as he drew near middle age. When he married he gave up all his loose habits. Yes, he married; it was the Tinsley heiress, Miss Linshaw, whom he had been courting at the time of the murder; and I have heard that poor Jane Waycross, even after *she* was married to Mr. Waycross, used to bite her pillow at

night because she was so horribly jealous of Miss Linshaw.

"Mr. Wilkes had always been tall, and now he was finely stout. He always wore frock-coats. Though he had lost most of his hair, his beard was full and curly; he had twinkling black eyes, and twinkling ruddy cheeks, and a bluff voice. All the children ran to him. They say he broke as many feminine hearts as before. At any wholesome entertainment he was always the first to lead the cotillion or applaud the fiddler, and I do not know what hostesses would have done without him.

"On Christmas Eve, then—remember, I am not sure of the date—the Fentons gave a Christmas party. The Fentons were the very nice family who had taken this house afterwards, you know. There was to be no dancing, but all the old games. Naturally, Mr. Wilkes was the first of all to be invited, and the first to accept; for everything was all smoothed away by time, like the wrinkles in last year's counterpane; and what's past is past, or so they say. They had decorated the house with holly and mistletoe, and guests began to arrive as early as two in the afternoon.

"I had all this from Mrs. Fenton's aunt (one of the Warwickshire Abbots), who was actually staying here at the time. In spite of such a festal season, the preparations had not been going at all well that day, though such preparations usually did. Miss Abbott complained that there was a nasty earthy smell in the house. It was a dark and raw day, and the chimneys did not seem to draw as well as they should. What is more, Mrs. Fenton cut her finger when she was carving the cold fowl, because she said one of the children had been hiding behind the window-curtains in here, and peeping out at her; she was very angry. But Mr. Fenton, who was going about

the house in his carpet slippers before the arrival of the guests, called her 'Mother' and said that it was Christmas.

"It is certainly true that they forgot all about this when the fun of the games began. Such squealings you never heard! or so I am told. Foremost of all at Bobbing for Apples or Nuts in May was Mr. Jeremy Wilkes. He stood, gravely paternal, in the midst of everything, with his ugly wife beside him, and stroked his beard. He saluted each of the ladies on the cheek under the mistletoe; there was also some scampering to salute him; and, though he *did* remain for longer than was necessary behind the window-curtains with the younger Miss Twigelow, his wife only smiled. There was only one unpleasant incident, soon forgotten. Towards dusk a great gusty wind began to come up, with the chimneys smoking worse than usual. It being nearly dark, Mr. Fenton said it was time to fetch in the Snapdragon Bowl, and watch it flame. You know the game? It is a great bowl of lighted spirit, and you must thrust in your hand and pluck out a raisin from the bottom without scorching your fingers. Mr. Fenton carried it in on a tray in the half-darkness; it was flickering with that bluish flame you have seen on Christmas puddings. Miss Abbott said that once, in carrying it, he started and turned round. She said that for a second she thought there was a face looking over his shoulder, and it wasn't a nice face.

"Later in the evening, when the children were sleepy and there was tissue-paper scattered all over the house, the grown-ups began their games in earnest. Someone suggested Blind Man's Bluff. They were mostly using the hall and this room here, as having more space than the dining-room. Various members of the party were blind-folded with the men's handkerchiefs; but there was a

dreadful amount of cheating. Mr. Fenton grew quite annoyed about it, because the ladies almost always caught Mr. Wilkes when they could; Mr. Wilkes was laughing and perspiring heartily, and his great cravat with the silver pin had almost come loose.

"To make it certain nobody could cheat, Mr. Fenton got a little white linen bag like this one. It was the pillow-cover off the baby's cot, really; and he said nobody could look through that if it were tied over the head.

"I should explain that they had been having some trouble with the lamp in this room. Mr. Fenton said: 'Confound it, mother, what is wrong with that lamp? Turn up the wick, will you?' It was really quite a good lamp from Spence and Minstead's, and should not have burned so dull as it did. In the confusion, while Mrs. Fenton was trying to make the light better, and he was looking over his shoulder at her, Mr. Fenton had been rather absently fastening the bag on the head of the last person caught. He has said since that he did not notice who it was. No one else noticed, either, the light being so dim and there being such a large number of people. It seemed to be a girl in a broad bluish kind of dress, standing over near the door.

"Perhaps you know how people act when they have just been blindfolded in this game. First they usually stand very still, as though they were smelling or sensing in which direction to go. Sometimes they make a sudden jump, or sometimes they begin to shuffle gently forward. Everyone noticed what an air of *purpose* there seemed to be about this person whose face was covered; she went forward very slowly, and seemed to crouch down a bit.

"It began to move towards Mr. Wilkes in very short

but quick little jerks, the white bag bobbing on its face. At this time Mr. Wilkes was sitting at the end of the table, laughing, with his face pink above the beard, and a glass of our Kentish cider in his hand. I want you to imagine this room as being very dim, and much more cluttered, what with all the tassels they had on the furniture then; and the high-piled hair of the ladies, too. The hooded person got to the edge of the table. It began to edge along towards Mr. Wilkes's chair; and then it jumped.

"Mr. Wilkes got up and skipped (yes, skipped) out of its way, laughing. It waited quietly, after which it went, in the same slow way, towards him again. It nearly got him again, by the edge of the potted plant. All this time it did not say anything, you understand, although everyone was applauding it and crying encouraging advice. It kept its head down. Miss Abbott says she began to notice an unpleasant faint smell of burnt cloth or something worse, which turned her half-ill. By the time the hooded person came stooping clear across the room, as certainly as though it could see him, Mr. Wilkes was not laughing any longer.

"In the corner by one bookcase, he said out loud: 'I'm tired of this silly, rotten game; go away, do you hear?' Nobody there had ever heard him speak like that, in such a loud, wild way, but they laughed and thought it must be the Kentish cider. 'Go away!' cried Mr. Wilkes again, and began to strike at it with his fist. All this time, Miss Abbott says, she had observed his face gradually changing. He dodged again, very pleasant and nimble for such a big man, but with the perspiration running down his face. Back across the room he went again, with it following him; and he cried out

something that most naturally shocked them all inexpressibly.

"He screamed out: 'For God's sake, Fenton, take it off me!'

"And for the last time the thing jumped.

"They were over near the curtains of that bay window, which were drawn as they are now. Miss Twigelow, who was nearest, says that Mr. Wilkes could not have seen anything, because the white bag was still drawn over the woman's head. The only thing she noticed was that at the lower part of the bag, where the face must have been, there was a curious kind of discoloration, a stain of some sort which had not been there before: something seemed to be seeping through. Mr. Wilkes fell back between the curtains, with the hooded person after him, and screamed again. There was a kind of thrashing noise in or behind the curtains; then they fell straight again, and everything grew quiet.

"Now, our Kentish cider is very strong, and for a moment Mr. Fenton did not know what to think. He tried to laugh at it, but the laugh did not sound well. Then he went over to the curtains, calling out gruffly to them to come out of there and not play the fool. But, after he had looked inside the curtains, he turned round very sharply and asked the rector to get the ladies out of the room. This was done, but Miss Abbott often said that she had one quick peep inside. Though the bay windows were locked on the inside, Mr. Wilkes was now alone on the window seat. She could see his beard sticking up, and the blood. He was dead, of course. But, since he had murdered Jane Waycross, I sincerely think that he deserved to die."

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For several seconds the two listeners did not move. She had all too successfully conjured up this room in the late 'seventies, whose stuffiness still seemed to pervade it now.

"But look here!" protested Hunter, when he could fight down an inclination to get out of the room quickly. "You say he killed her after all? And yet you told us he had an absolute alibi. You said he never went closer to the house than the windows. . . ."

"No more he did, my dear," said the other.

"He was courting the Linshaw heiress at the time," she resumed; "and Miss Linshaw was a very proper young lady who would have been horrified if she had heard about him and Jane Waycross. She would have broken off the match, naturally. But poor Jane Waycross meant her to hear. She was much in love with Mr. Wilkes, and she was going to tell the whole matter publicly: Mr. Wilkes had been trying to persuade her not to do so."

"But——"

"Oh, don't you see what happened?" cried the other in a pettish tone. "It is so dreadfully simple. I am not clever at these things, but I should have seen it in a moment: even if I did not already know. I told you everything so that you should be able to guess."

"When Mr. Wilkes and Dr. Sutton and Mr. Pawley drove past here in the gig that night, they saw a bright light burning in the windows of this room. I told you that. But the police never wondered, as anyone should, what caused that light. Jane Waycross never came into this room, as you know; she was out in the hall, carrying either a lamp or a candle. But that lamp in the thick blue-silk shade, held out there in the hall, would not have caused a bright light to shine through this room and

illuminate it. Neither would a tiny candle; it is absurd. And I told you there were no other lamps in the house except some empty ones waiting to be filled in the back kitchen. There is only one thing they could have seen. They saw the great blaze of the paraffin oil round Jane Waycross's body.

"Didn't I tell you it was dreadfully simple? Poor Jane was upstairs waiting for her lover. From the upstairs window she saw Mr. Wilkes's gig drive along the road in the moonlight, and she did not know there were other men in it; she thought he was alone. She came downstairs——

"It is an awful thing that the police did not think more about that broken medicine-bottle lying in the hall, the large bottle that was broken in just two long pieces. She must have had a use for it; and, of course, she had. You knew that the oil in the lamp was almost exhausted, although there was a great blaze round the body. When poor Jane came downstairs, she was carrying the unlighted lamp in one hand; in the other hand she was carrying a lighted candle, and an old medicine-bottle containing paraffin oil. When she got downstairs, she meant to fill the lamp from the medicine-bottle, and then light it with the candle.

"But she was too eager to get downstairs, I am afraid. When she was more than half-way down, hurrying, that long nightgown tripped her. She pitched forward down the stairs on her face. The medicine-bottle broke on the tiles under her, and poured a lake of paraffin round her body. Of course, the lighted candle set the paraffin blazing when it fell; but that was not all. One intact side of that broken bottle, long and sharp and cleaner than any blade, cut into her throat when she fell on the smashed

bottle. She was not quite stunned by the fall. When she felt herself burning, and the blood almost as hot, she tried to save herself. She tried to crawl forward on her hands, forward into the hall, away from the blood and oil and fire.

"That was what Mr. Wilkes really saw when he looked in through the window.

"You see, he had been unable to get rid of the two fuddled friends, who insisted on clinging to him and drinking with him. He had been obliged to drive them home. If he could not go to 'Clearlawns' now, he wondered how at least he could leave a message; and the light in the window gave him an excuse.

"He saw pretty Jane propped up on her hands in the hall, looking out at him beseechingly while the blue flame ran up and turned yellow. You might have thought he would have pitied, for she loved him very much. Her wound was not really a deep wound. If he had broken into the house at that moment, he might have saved her life. But he preferred to let her die: because now she would make no public scandal and spoil his chances with the rich Miss Linshaw. That was why he returned to his friends and told a lie about a murderer in a tall hat. It is why, in heaven's truth, he murdered her himself. But when he returned to his friends, I do not wonder that they saw him mopping his forehead. You know now how Jane Waycross came back for him, presently."

There was another heavy silence.

The girl got to her feet, with a sort of bouncing motion which was as suggestive as it was vaguely familiar. It was as though she were about to run. She stood there, a trifle crouched, in her prim brown dress, so oddly narrow

at the waist after an old-fashioned pattern; and in the play of light on her face Rodney Hunter fancied that its prettiness was only a shell.

"The same thing happened afterwards, on some Christmas Eves," she explained. "They played Blind Man's Bluff over again. That is why people who live here do not care to risk it nowadays. It happens at a quarter-past seven——"

Hunter stared at the curtains. "But it was a quarter-past seven when we got here!" he said. "It must now be——"

"Oh, yes," said the girl, and her eyes brimmed over. "You see, I told you you had nothing to fear; it was all over then. But that is not why I thank you. I begged you to stay, and you did. You have listened to me, as no one else would. And now I have told it at last, and now I think both of us can sleep."

Not a fold stirred or altered in the dark curtains that closed the window bay; yet, as though a blurred lens had come into focus, they now seemed innocent and devoid of harm. You could have put a Christmas-tree there. Rodney Hunter, with Muriel following his gaze, walked across and threw back the curtains. He saw a quiet window-seat covered with chintz, and the rising moon beyond the window. When he turned round, the girl in the old-fashioned dress was not there. But the front doors were open again, for he could feel a current of air blowing through the house.

With his arm round Muriel, who was white-faced, he went out into the hall. They did not look long at the scorched and beaded stains at the foot of the panelling, for even the scars of fire seemed gentle now. Instead, they

stood in the doorway looking out, while the house threw its great blaze of light across the frosty Weald. It was a welcoming light. Over the rise of a hill, black dots trudging in the frost showed that Jack Bannister's party was returning; and they could hear the sound of voices carrying far. They heard one of the party carelessly singing a Christmas carol for glory and joy, and the laughter of children coming home.

THE END

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